

The Power of Forgiveness to the Offender!
Series on Forgiveness
Luke 15:1-2, 10-31; Genesis 32:22-31
July 20, 2008

^{NRS} **Genesis 32:22** The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

^{NRS} **Luke 15:1** Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ... **10** Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." ¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one-- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was

lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

Last week the emphasis was on *forgiveness* in Christian faith **different** from the Jewish or Islamic faith traditions. **This week** the focus is on the power of forgiveness for the “*offender.*” **Next** week the focus shifts to the power of forgiveness for the offended person.

What stands in the way for the power of forgiveness to operate in the offender? There are two stumbling blocks: 1) denial and 2) pride. The key that opens the door of forgiveness for the offender is “humility.”

The image that gives clarity to this process of forgiveness is a **door.** Doors can open or close; give entrance to life or lock us out and leave us isolated in the darkness of aloneness. Today the focus is on the door that can open a way to life for a person who has sinned against God or one’s neighbor. A wrong or a sin generates a burden of guilt. Doing wrong creates a debt to the one wronged. Is the door shut and locked tightly to prevent resolution?

Two scriptures illustrate the power of forgiveness for the offender. In the Old Testament story, Jacob wronged his father, Isaac, and his brother, Esau. For a long period, Jacob did not and could not repent and seek forgiveness. In the Gospel story, the younger brother sins against the family and is left destitute because of his own actions. He comes to understand this and seeks to return to his family; but his older brother cannot see the dark judgmental spirit that prevents restoration and reconciliation. He needs forgiveness but he will not confess his need. This can be a story of compassion and a proclamation of Good News to the offender.

This is what happened to the great Old Testament patriarch, **Jacob**. He scandalized the family when he stole the inheritance and blessing from his brother, Esau. The story today shows Jacob just prior to encountering his brother and his army. Jacob wrestles an angel all night long, demanding a blessing from the divine stranger. When he gets this blessing and gets release, it comes with a price tag. His name and identity change from **Jacob** to Israel, and from then on, Jacob walks with a physical limp which resulted from the all night wrestling match with the divine.

Sin and moral depravity are types of death that bind us up in a death grip. This death grip upon the soul needs release to reenter life and the family of God. Jesus illustrates the power that can release a person from spiritual

death of sin and the burden of guilt. Consider the story of **Lazarus** in the Gospel lesson today. Jesus learns that his dear friend is dying and he is asked to come and to help him, perhaps heal him or save him from his earthly death. But, alas, Jesus takes his time, four days to be exact, to come to his friend's side. Meanwhile, Lazarus dies and is bound up in the cloths that surround his body for burial. He has been in the tomb several days. His body has begun to break down and it even stinks, when Jesus gets there.

Then Jesus does a remarkable deed. He calls out to his friend, already dead and buried in a tomb (By the way, I have been there to this burial place for Lazarus at Bethany in Israel. It is down a steep set of steps and around a corner in a narrow niche cut away for his body.) Jesus calls out loudly so that no one can be mistaken, "***Come out Lazarus.***" Then Lazarus comes up from the grave, wrapped in cloths looking more like a mummy. Friends rush to him to help. Jesus says to the bystanders, "***Unbind him.***" This word is powerful. It means literally to "***release him***" from the same word that means elsewhere "***to forgive sins.***" [*apoluo* {*ap-ol-oo'-o*} Meaning: 1) to set free 2) to let go, dismiss...] (Bible Works 5, cf. John 11:44 use of *luo* – to loose a person tied or fastened or bound with chains)

When a person is ***bound up*** in a state of being "***un-forgiven,***" it is like a heavy indestructible **prison door** slamming shut behind you (tied up or

chained in shackles). I have taken a tour inside a prison. I can tell you that it is a frightening feeling to lose control of your freedom, even when it is done voluntarily.

Today, the *proclamation of the good news* of Jesus Christ is about **divine compassion**. Jesus forgives in radical and scandalous ways. He eats and drinks and talks with sinners to the horror of neighbors and some religious leaders. His actions toward Zacchaeus who had defrauded others of money to line his pockets with profit are shocking. But, it is the power to forgive and transform that also attracts us to Jesus. His action toward his beloved disciple, Peter, after Peter had denied him three times just before his execution, was both shocking and inspiring. Jesus redeemed Peter and empowered him to **live again** in a more dynamic way. This is the **release** that “*forgiveness*” causes inside a person. It is a transforming of the mind and heart to live a life that is able to reflect the master, Jesus. It is a release and a freedom from being bound up in wrong toward others and God.

Not to be forgiven is a life sentence of guilt and condemnation. It is living in a state of hopelessness. Not to be forgiven is to lose every advantage that the compassion of Jesus truly offers the world from the cross. It is this **compassion** of Jesus that responded to the thief on the cross when he said, “*Remember me when you come into your kingdom.*” Divine justice

has nothing to do with forgiveness. But, mercy has everything to do with God's compassion to those locked behind the doors, which no one can open. Peace, joy, hope and reconciliation proceed from this divine mercy and compassion to open the locked doors of the heart of both the violator and the violated.

Desmond Tutu in an address at the National Cathedral spoke on the process known as *Truth and Reconciliation*, reflecting on the end of Apartheid in South Africa. "No matter the trespass, Tutu said that people should always be able to forgive. It's the only way to uncover the "*Christian harmony that was intended from the beginning*," he continued.

... "*Forgiveness is not for sissies*," Tutu said. "*Forgiveness stares the beast in the eye... to name the hurt and then to refuse to retaliate. It is not retributive but restorative. It seeks not to punish but to heal.*"

"For without forgiveness there is no future," he adds, repetitively. "*There is no future between communities and between nations.*"

(<http://media.www.blackcollegeview.com/media/storage/paper928/news/2007/11/11/News/Forgiveness.Is.Key.To.Reconciliation.Tutu.Says.At.Cathedral-3108191.shtml>)

White and black members of the military met with angry tribesmen to ask forgiveness after the many years of *Apartheid* violence in South Africa.

One officer stood **unrepentant** before the amnesty hearing in a township that was known as “***Bisha Massacre.***” The room was filled to the rafters with those wounded and families of those killed on that day, when the order was given to government troops to open fire. The first officer did not confess and riled the crowd. The room temperature rose. Then, the next group rose to speak. There were four officers – one white and 3 black. The white officer was the spokesperson. He said, “***Yes, we gave the orders to open fire.***” The temperature of the room rose again. Then this white officer turned to the crowd and addressed them, “***Please forgive us. And, please accept my colleagues back into our community.***” Then, Bishop Tutu asked the gathering to keep silence because, he said, “*we were in the presence of something holy.*”

In the film, *The Power of Forgiveness*, there is a story that appeared on NBC’s *Making a Difference* this week. It was about a 14 year old African-American boy who plotted with friends to steal a pizza from a delivery boy. The pizza deliver was a young and vibrant college student named Tariq Khamisa. Tony Hicks demanded the pizza and then shot and killed Tariq Khamisa when he didn’t give him the pizza.

Tony Hicks was convicted and sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. His grandfather, Plez Felix, raised him and is a faithful Baptist Christian.

The Khamisa family are Suffi Muslims. After his period of grieving, a spiritual mentor advised the father, Azim Khamisa, to do a good deed on behalf of his son. What Mr. Khamisa did was extraordinary. He forgave Tony Hicks for the murder of his son. Young Tony Hicks said that no one had ever done anything like that for him. This act began a friendship and allowed healing of deep wounds to happen. Azim Khamisa teamed up with Tony's grandfather, Plez Felix, and toured schools to talk about the power of forgiveness over revenge. Mr. Khamisa has gone yet another incredible step in healing. He is going to work for Tony Hicks' release and he has promised to hire him in the Tariq Khamisa Foundation. Becoming friends has done something within Tony and his grandfather. It has changed them and given them new life. The long term benefit to them is **friendship**. They together say to groups with whom they plead to stop violence, "*If others could be friends like they have become to each other, what would the world be like?*" This is the power that forgiveness has upon the offender who has hurt and wronged another.

It is no easy task for Christians to *offer or to receive* forgiveness. There are **stumbling blocks**. What are they? One is not knowing or not admitting wrong. When do you know that you are the offending party and need to be forgiven? This is a **problem** to those who are filled with **pride**.

We blame others and do not accept our own responsibility for hurt an pain.
That leaves the door closed to healing.

Another stumbling block is **denial**. It is an almost impossible task to those who cloak themselves in religious piety and *see the speck in another's eye, but not the log in their own*. We think that we have done no wrong and do not need forgiveness. We deny responsibility and try to put the blame on others. Religious folks are experts at judgmentalism that focuses on denouncing the wrong in the other

I have seen it too often in the church. We too often *judge other's behavior* with no mercy and cannot see our own attitude that excludes others, especially children, and sets ourselves above others in a manner of spiritually unhealthy superiority.

This is spiritual denial. No one comes into the body of Christ perfect. For we all fall short and require God's mercy and grace each day, which is one reason why we so frequently say the Lord's Prayer. It reminds us of God's mercy and compassion that is activated when it lives in and through us.

The other stumbling block is **Pride**. Pride prevents us from confessing our own sin and being able to be forgiven. Denial leaves us locked behind doors of our own dark spirit. Pride hides the key from our spiritual view. We

cannot face our own shame and guilt. We cannot confess our wrong to the other. The old saying is true, “Pride comes before the fall.”

We, who offend and violate, need also to be released from the power that locks the doors of human hearts and minds. We may not be able to live fully unless we know and believe and trust that **we need forgiveness**. If we **cannot** do this, then we remain in the dark behind the locked cell doors of pride. Tony Hicks realized how much he needed forgiveness from the father of the young man he killed. Humbled by Azim Khamisa’s compassion to forgive him, he said, “No one ever did this for me before.”

In the Prodigal Son story, the **elder brother** could not ask forgiveness from his father or his younger brother, because of his dark self-centered spirit. On the other hand, the **younger brother** recognized his brokenness and sin and sought forgiveness and restoration to the family.

Perhaps the younger brother, aware of his wrong doing, prayed like the repentant thief on the cross seeking compassion from Jesus, recognizes the log in his own eye. If we can recognize our need to be forgiven, it is the song of freedom that begins our journey to healing and unity with God and each other.

The convicted thief on the cross beside Jesus in his last moments of life found the key and the door opened. Whatever our wrong or sin may be

our plea and song for life. It may sound something like this, “*Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.*” Wherever you are on your journey of faith, let this be your song. Sing this with me and let it be our call to be forgiven. “*Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.*” Amen.