

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 13 JUNE 2010

Mr Robert Sanderson

Luke 7: 36 – 8: 3

“The Love of the Forgiven”

Our Gospel reading is all about forgiveness. Jesus had a lot to say about forgiveness. “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6: 12); “Forgive and you’ll be forgiven.” (Luke 6: 37c). And this is not surprising since being hurt by others can be a distressing occurrence in our daily lives.

I

There are endless examples of being unjustly hurt: being wrongly punished; being cheated; being rejected by someone we love; being crushed by another’s infidelity; being deceived; being hurt by false and malicious gossip; being manipulated against our will; being done out of an inheritance; being fired from a job without good cause... I did say the list was endless! And we haven’t taken into account the more serious wrongs.

Our immediate response to being hurt is the innate flight or fight reaction. It is part of our natural self-preservation instinct. In this context it is to *avoid* or to *seek revenge*. When we are hurt by others in less serious ways there is still the wish to redress the wrong, to pay the other person back in some way. It is what the psychologist Charles Zeiders calls the *Will to Punish*.

To get our own back on the other may make us feel “better” but it may also lead to other problems. We all know about the endless feuding that can take place families. But, there is a real danger that if this sense of justice is not satisfied it can harden a part of our psyches and damage our lives. If, for instance, the person who betrayed our trust was our best friend, then we may become wary of other friends and it could affect the depth of friendship that we can make with others.

It would give us some comfort if we could only forget a past that we cannot change. If we could only choose to forget the cruelest moments, we could, as time goes on, free ourselves from their pain. But the wrong sticks like a nettle to our memory. The only way to remove the nettle is with a surgical procedure called ‘forgiveness’. L B Smedes in *The Art of Forgiving*.

In the last twenty years, there are many studies that have shown that forgiveness has a major healing effect. It contributes to a positive attitude to life and psychological well-being.

But what do we mean by forgiveness?

First, I want to say that we need to throw away the childish notions expressed in such words as “Kiss and make up”, “Say sorry right now”, “Forgive and forget.” These are patronizing and deny the pain of the wronged person. Life is much more complicated than that – after all, we are talking about one, or if it becomes a scrap both, being deeply hurt.

There are many definitions of forgiveness. One that I like is by Freedman and Enright who say that interpersonal forgiveness is:

...fostering the undeserved qualities of beneficence and compassion toward the offender. Forgiveness is in the context of deep injustice in contrast to every day annoyance. There is a decidedly paradoxical quality to forgiveness as the forgiver gives up the resentment to which [she or] he has a right and gives the gift of compassion to which the offender has no right.

Dr Zeiders cautions against what he calls “forgiveness myths.”

- Forgiveness is not sanctioning and condoning abusive behavior. True forgiveness recognizes that something wrong occurred.
- Forgiveness is not conditional. We do not say: “I’ll forgive you if you change.” ... We say: “I forgive the person who trespasses against me regardless of whether or not they repent.”
- Forgiveness is not reconciliation. It is a separate construct from reconciliation. [see below] Many people who forgive should create huge boundaries between themselves and the people who have trespassed against them.
- Forgiveness is not denial... My recommendation is to not pursue forgiveness until the person doing the forgiving is in touch with their anger.
- Forgiveness is not forgetting... If somebody hurts you, and you forgive them, maintain a wide boundary between yourself and them. Do not assume that your forgiveness has changed the person who hurt you. Forgiveness is the forgiver’s project, not the trespasser’s. One’s forgiveness does not necessarily heal or influence the other person...

One very important clarification must be made. It is never a good idea for someone who has been seriously harmed (such as in a relationship where there is physical or sexual abuse) to remain in that situation. Forgiveness cannot take place if there is no safety. This is where forgiveness is fundamentally different from reconciliation. The forgiveness we are discussing is about healing our hurt. Reconciliation may or may not take place *after* forgiveness has occurred.

For forgiveness to take place we must own the emotion (usually anger) – to really acknowledge and feel it. Then we can start to come to terms with it and understand why the event happened. Unless we do this we run the possibility of ruminating on it over and over again. We need an explanation, even if the explanation is that it was a chance occurrence. In the end, it is all about letting go.

In a relationship, hurts are often exacerbated by a difference in power between the two. Letting go means relinquishing that power difference and returning to equality and thereby equanimity.

In an article in the *Journal of Family Therapy* H. Aponte says:

... forgiveness at its core is a freely made intention to let go of the bitter debt to which we hold another. It is a desire to let go that grows out of a commitment to free oneself and the other person from the bondage of debt and hurt, however grievous.

One further point. Forgiveness is not easy. It sometimes requires very hard work. And it must be said that if a situation arises that is particularly stressful, there is always help available. There is no need to feel self-conscious about this. Many, many people need and seek professional help at some time in their lives.

II

So, now to our Gospel story.

The story of the woman who gatecrashes the all-male symposium to anoint Jesus is to be found in all the gospels. Luke’s particular take on the story has the woman enter the house of Simon, the

Pharisee. She bathes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries his feet with her hair and continues kissing his feet while she anoints them with ointment. When the host complains that she is a known sinner, Jesus takes him to task for not being a good host since Simon didn't provide water to wash his feet and didn't kiss him when he entered or anointed his head. Washing of the feet of a guest is required by the law of hospitality. Jesus announces that her many sins have been forgiven and she shows him great love. And, in the manner characteristic of Jesus who turned conventional wisdom on its head, he pointedly says to Simon, "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

A few things to notice:

1. Luke says the woman stood behind Jesus as she bathes his feet. Of course she did, Jesus would have been lying on a couch facing the others. Her presence in front would have made her the centre of attention.
2. We are not told what her sins were or what brought her to Jesus. Many have assumed that she was a prostitute. Possibly this is because her attention to Jesus is very sensual. The account seems to indicate that Jesus is pleased by her attention. And why not? We cannot love in situations where we are rejected. This physical expression of love is perfectly natural and is accepted by Jesus. Why should it surprise us?
3. Jesus declares that her sins have *already* been forgiven and it is for this reason, she is able to express such love. It is not her love that enables forgiveness. It is that, *being forgiven*, she is able to love. This is in marked contrast to Simon who is the righteous Pharisee.

There is one word in the scriptures that is variously translated as 'righteous' and as 'justified'. And this is worth explaining. We think of the word 'right' in scripture as having a moral meaning. It is closer to the real meaning if we think about the way we use 'right' in the sense of a 'right-angle', 'right and true' as the builders would say, 'to right a boat' or 'upright'. 'Being upright' – that's the metaphor. A person who is stable and reliable – someone others can look up to.

This is how we should view Simon. Of course, there is nothing wrong with being righteous, but Simon has allowed his righteous zeal to harden and to become overly self-assured. In doing this he has convinced himself that he doesn't need much forgiveness. He neither understands nor is able to help the woman. This is the meaning of the phrase, "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." You can probably think of examples where someone is so focused on right and wrong that they lose all compassion.

Luke has in mind more than the forgiveness and the love between people. There can also be the forgiveness of self. So often we do things which cause us guilt and pain. These are often things which conflict with the pattern we have from Jesus. It is Jesus who pleases God. By knowing Jesus we know God. Jesus didn't give us laws as in the Mosaic Law, he indicated the Way.

John Cobb puts it like this:

The closest he [Jesus] came [to the Law] are the teachings gathered by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. But these cannot function as law in the believing community. When viewed as commandments, they present to us ideals that do not work in ordinary society. Their impracticability does not make them unimportant. They are a call to perfection that, once really heard, cannot be forgotten or ignored. We measure all we do and think and feel against them, and we know that we fall short. We can listen to these words without being overwhelmed by guilt only because we focus on the one who spoke them. We experience the compassion and love that surround us in our struggle. We hear words of forgiveness. We know that Jesus did not come into the world to condemn us but to help and affirm us.

Luke's story of the love of the forgiven woman is also about our relationship with God. When we seek forgiveness, we do not seek it from a God who demands obedience. We seek it from a God who delights in our freedom from that which would make us less than we can be. The God of grace enables us, because we are forgiven, to fully express our love – to ourselves, to others and to God.