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2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
“Parable of Two Parents”

Most of us who have been in the church for a long time, know very well the parable just read. We call it the “Parable of the Lost Son” or the “Parable of the Two Sons” or the “Parable of the Forgiving Father.” I am calling it the “Parable of Two Parents.” The second parent is implied. My sermon can apply to two couples of any gender or to single parent families.

Using the biblical story as model, two Christian biological parents have two biological children and one child in late teen or early adult life engages in reckless and so-called dissolute living, which terribly disappoints the parents.

The journey to a far place does not have to be literal. It can be a far place in the use and misuse of substances or a far place in terms of lifestyle choices. Either way, it travels far from expectations of the parents. It violates values that the parent tried to establish for the child.

The child returns home from this far place, is repentant and wants to build a new life and the two parents react differently.

One parent, like the father in the biblical parable, welcomes, forgives and celebrates the return. The other parent is resentful, bent out of shape that the child violated his or her good Christian values and does not want to let go of her or his thoughts and feelings (often of guilt in how they raised the child and self-blame that pushes the child away). He or she is unforgiving but goes along with the show. This parent suspects that the apology is not genuine or thinks the misdeeds outweigh the apology. Reasons emerge for non-acceptance.

The parable elicits two lights from God. One, the light shines on the reconciling, celebrating family (although a sibling might be upset as in the biblical parable). The other light is a spotlight, which God shines on the unforgiving parent. It shines on the sin (if we can call it that) of a parent who does not embrace a repentant child, if the child is truly repentant as the biblical story indicates.

In the scriptural story, the wayward son comes to his senses and goes home repentant. He arrives home and his father runs out to greet him. He says, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” (v. 21) The father embraces his son and celebrates his return.

I like this segment of the story because it feeds into a conversation on forgiveness. Some people say that one should forgive no matter what. Others say that one can only forgive if the other party *asks* for forgiveness. I tend towards the latter.

In a worship service, we say a prayer of confession and God forgives us. Confession precedes forgiveness. God forgives based on our sincerely confessing where we have wronged self, neighbor, God. There is something healthy about searching within oneself and being honest with one's violation, abuse, whatever, and confessing it to God. The Bible extends the confession to the people we have wronged. It could include reparation.

If the son or daughter confesses his or her transgression, the parents must forgive, move on and celebrate the light. If the child does not confess, there are still parents who will forgive, embrace the child, celebrate and move on.

Lewis B. Smedes, former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Art of Forgiveness*, says, "Forgiving is love's toughest work, and love's biggest risk. If you twist it into something it was never meant to be, it can make you a doormat or an insufferable manipulator. Forgiving seems almost unnatural. Our sense of fairness tells us people should pay for the wrong they do. But forgiving is love's power to break nature's rule."

In other words, you do not have to forgive and forgive if people disrespect or abuse your forgiveness and keep trampling over you and you don't use forgiveness as a way of getting the better of another or later emotionally blackmailing the person. Forgiveness is a genuine response of the heart to get relationships back into center with God in Christ. It cleans the slate.

Still, I think forgiveness is largely based on someone asking for forgiveness but if the person does not, then to forgive might indeed set you, the injured party, free. I suppose there is a time when what looks like cheap grace becomes too expensive to avoid.

When I wait or expect someone to apologize and the person does not, I feel in my heart that I cannot forgive, but I can let go and make room for God take care of the situation. In letting go, I still try to maintain a relationship with the person who hurt me and I heal in other ways. That might not be enough and I circle back to considering forgiveness. Therein emerges the art of forgiveness.

Then again, if a parent cannot or does not forgive an unrepentant child, he or she can learn to love the child in an entirely new way. One hopes that the parent accepts the child irrespective of the child's admittance and moves on to a new relationship with the hope that the new relationship and the new place that parent and child go (adult

child at this point) will bring healing. Acceptance is not forgiveness but it can heal wounds as difficult as it might be for the injured party. We cannot make people see their sins and confess them.

The 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 reading, the second lectionary text for the day provides a nuance. Paul writes, "...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, *not counting their trespasses against them*, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

If God does not count our trespasses against us, then surely we can do the same to those who have wronged us. We trust that when all parties have been reconciled to God in Christ new insight and spiritual fermentation and healing will take place.

Nothing is easy. This sermon has dipped into psychotherapy. I cannot help it being married for 40 years to a psychotherapist. She had no influence on this sermon. Her only influence has been that she is married to me and that is a major influence – for the good!

What is the Lenten message in this? Lent is a time of searching, reflection and repentance. It is a time of cleansing. In the Parable of Two Parents, the parent in the spotlight has travelled his or her own journey *away from the child and God* and must return, accept, confess and forgive one way or another.

The biblical story is still a "Parable of the Lost Son" and the son still has to face himself and his transgression (which he does) and travel his own journey. The same goes for sons and daughters today. We all are daughters or sons.

Somewhere in the middle of all this is "grace" which is something else we can reflect on in Lent. Amen.