

Sermon – Forgiveness

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Preached at All Saints' Church Belmont

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Readings: 2 Cor 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

May my words and our reflections on this sermon be acceptable to you God. Amen

- God forgives you
- Forgive others
- Forgive yourself

Our topic for today is forgiveness, and our two readings today should be very familiar to you.

In the first one from 2 Corinthians 5 we hear:

17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

As Christians we get to start again – everything is new

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,[c] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Christ died to save us from our sins – and has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation that Christ taught us.

There are two parts to our confession each week.

First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from God, not doubting, but firmly believing that, by it our sins are forgiven before God.

It's hard for us to take this on board. To firmly believe that our sins are forgiven.

Confession is something that sounds very churchy. The Anglican Church, comes from the Catholic and Reformed tradition, and we don't make it an obligation that people confess privately to a Priest. The regular way to express our confession is in public in our Communion Service.

But we do also provide an opportunity to make a sacramental confession to God through a priest if we want to, and for some people this is the only way to make real the truth they need to tell.

Some of course like to confess on shows like Oprah or Jeremy Kyle in a much more public way.

Public confession in Church is like a private conversation with God in public.

It's private in that we are asked to "draw near" "*Draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith and make your humble confession to God*" (based on Hebrews 4.14 and 10.22).

You can imagine, speaking quietly to God, profoundly, in the depths of your heart. We're not asked to put on display all the complexities of our confession in front of other people, but we do it together. Our confession is both private and public.

This is why we create space within the confession for people to make their own heart known to God before pronouncing the Absolution. A space for us to confess our sins before you are forgiven. In our liturgy you will notice a silent period between the two.

There are some who use confession as a weekly opportunity to receive confession and absolution, but then go right on and sin again. This is where repentance comes in. Repentance or in Greek *metánoia* means "to change one's mind, attitude and purpose" in other words "to turn away from the activity that led to the sin and not do it again".

It reminds me of the movies that show mafia members confessing, receiving absolution or forgiveness from a Priest and then going right on with activities that are against the commandments (Mortal Sins perhaps). Absolution only occurs though where there is repentance or because of the love of God.

So, if we are able to confess, and receive absolution or forgiveness by the grace of God, then why do we find it so difficult to forgive others.

Let's look at the second reading – which is from Luke 15, It's one of the most talked about parables in the bible. The Parable of the Lost Sheep. The Prodigal Son. This is a story about God's grace, and also our call to grace.

It starts talking about tax collectors and sinners (note not all tax collectors are sinners), although in those days I'm sure there were some who collected more than required and kept it for themselves. Jesus demonstrated coming along side them, and sharing meals with them.

You will see the elements of confession, and forgiveness and reconciliation within the story, and we can place ourselves in it. We no doubt see ourselves at moments as the prodigal son, who has or is squandering the inheritance received from God. That inheritance is not just money, it could also be intelligence, gifts of the spirit, health and other things – All that we are is a gift from God. We think we can live our lives as if God didn't exist or remotely exists. Then, we finally come to our senses and we come home to God.

At other moments we might see ourselves as the son who stayed on the farm. Someone who is hard hearted, someone

who judges others when we are specifically told that that is not our role.

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matthew 7.1)

There are some who might return to church but for the fear that they will be judged by so called good Christians. We have all met them. My church is better than your church, oh but we worship in this way, oh but I’m better because I pray in this way, or I have been baptised in this way. Such people may not return to the church because they fear they will encounter judgmental hearts.

And at other moments we might see ourselves as the father.

The story is so powerful because it is a story of one of the most important ideas in our faith tradition. It is the story of Grace.

The beautiful thing about this story’s communication of grace is that it’s not just the grace that we see with the father running out into the road to welcome home his son. It is also the story of grace shown to the other son. The father not only wants to share forgiveness with his wayward son, but he wants to share the joy of forgiving with his loyal son. We should note too that grace from the father comes before repentance.

We are asked to forgive and God Forgives. It is important to note that there is a difference between the kind of forgiveness that we can offer for deeds perpetrated on us and God’s forgiveness. We will never be able to forgive as God does.

Theologian Henri Nouwen said the following:

I have often said, “I forgive you,” but even as I said these words my heart remained angry or resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return—if only the praise for being so forgiving!

But God’s forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that does not demand anything of itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It is this divine forgiveness that I have to practice in my daily life. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude and compliments. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels hurt and wronged and that wants to stay in control and put a few conditions between me and the one whom I am asked to forgive... <https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/divine-forgiveness/>

So, let’s move to forgiving yourself.

The Bible has a lot to say about forgiveness, but it does not specifically address the concept of forgiving yourself. It does say a lot about not looking back, and in Christ all things are made new though. Usually, we talk about “forgiving yourself” when a person expresses persistent guilt over past sin or remorse over

negative consequences caused by an earlier decision. We might personally feel the need to “forgive ourselves” for our mistakes in order to move forward in our lives.

Forgiving yourself ultimately comes from understanding God’s forgiveness.

We do, of course, still struggle with sin, but God is faithful to cleanse us when we confess and God restores us to right fellowship (1 John 1:9; 2:1–2). Jesus’ sacrifice was enough for any and all of our sins. Forgiving yourself, then, actually has to do with receiving God’s forgiveness.

Paul, set a good example of forgiving oneself.

He had been a violent persecutor of the church. But rather than live in shame and regret over what he’d done, or think that God could not use him, or constantly remind himself of his sin, he spread the gospel broadly.

This was not from penance or trying to make up for his past. Rather, it was out of understanding God’s great salvation.

Paul wrote,

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example

for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:15–17).

Paul’s sin actually became an avenue by which God was glorified. Rather than refusing to forgive himself, Paul readily received God’s forgiveness and rejoiced in it.

So, let’s end with some words from page 458 of the Prayer Book.

God forgives and heals us

We need your healing, merciful God:

Give us true repentance.

Some sins are plain to us;

Some escape us, Some we cannot face, Forgive us;

Set us free to hear your word to us;

Set us free to serve you.

God forgives you.

Forgive others;

Forgive yourself.

Amen