

The Lord's Prayer: Our Unity

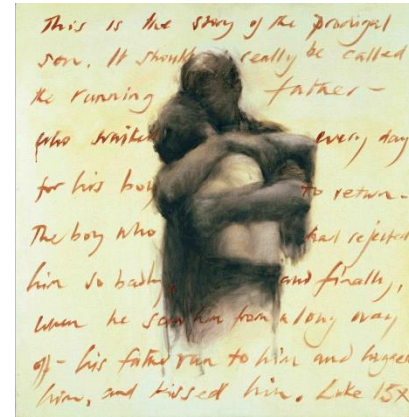
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Luke 15:11-24

Another Name for Freedom

My doctor said "Do cardio," not because there's anything wrong with my heart; she says that to everyone.



"The Prodigal Son" by Charlie Mackesy

"Your heart is a muscle that gets stronger the more you work it."

"Sure, okay," I said, but she knew I wasn't going to do it.

"And it burns fat."

"Sold!" I said.

Later I prevailed upon my very athletic son-in-law to help me pick out a pair of running shoes. I brought them home, laced them up and headed out for a run – it was more like a walk, punctuated by random brief bouts of running. And I felt great. You think? No! I felt stupid, awkward, out of shape, and clumsy; especially in that moment when I noticed my neighbor's new landscaping, turned to look, and fell on my face.

There was nothing broken, just a little skinned knee, but right then and there, I vowed that I would only run before daylight, which these days is about 5AM. Truth is, I am never going to be one of those gazelle-like women who run through my neighborhood in broad daylight. It's not my spiritual gift.

For me running at night is a matter of dignity. I need to preserve some shred of it.

When I hear Jesus' most famous story about a callous son and his forgiving father, what always jumps out is the father's running. In Jesus' world the senior members of the community did not run. Not ever; it was humiliating and degrading. The idea that this father, seeing his son, the boy who had cursed and abandoned him, brought gossip and disgrace upon his family, that this father would be filled with compassion, run to his son, put his arms around the boy and kiss him – it was unthinkable, a scandal.

Dr. N.T. Wright, New Testament professor at the University of St. Andrews (Scotland) says that this story of Jesus' really should be called The Parable of the Running Father,¹ or perhaps The Parable of the Lavish and Forgiving Father.

Wright also makes the point that we need scandal to wake us up. "We need shocking stories like the Running Father, because our generation has either forgotten about forgiveness, or trivialized it." He wrote, "[Today] if you feel hurt by something, our culture suggests that you simply retreat into your private world and pretend it didn't happen. We don't need God's forgiveness,

and we don't need to forgive anybody else." Today, Wright says, we "seldom get beyond small-scale private forgiveness for small-scale private sins."

And that's a problem. If what Dr. Wright is saying is true, it explains a lot – if we have either forgotten about forgiveness or trivialized it, that explains a lot about our national epidemic of mental illness, gun violence, suicide, addiction, racism, divorce, relationship violence, and a thousand other illnesses and isms that are – right now -- eating away at us and stealing our freedom and our happiness.

David Seamands, a well-known author and pastoral counselor wrote:

"I am driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of emotional illness among Christians are: the failure to understand, receive and live our God's forgiveness, and the failure to offer unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people."ⁱⁱ

We hear Jesus say, *Pray like this...Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*ⁱⁱⁱ We believe it, but forgiveness is not the way we live most of the time.

Could it be true? Could our salvation – the answer to the thing that steals our sleep and breaks up our families, the answer to the anger that obliterates our national life – could that answer be found in something as basic as learning to accept God's grace and offering it to others?

Jesus taught us to pray, *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.* At Woods we say, *Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.* Either way is fine. You probably know that there are two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the gospels. Matthew says *opheilema*, (oh-fay'-lay-mah) which means a debt, something owed. Luke says *hamartia*, (hah-mah-tee- ah) sins, errors, our violations of God's law. Both are right, both passages include the most important word: *aphiemi* (ah-fay'-a-mee) forgive. It means to send away, let go, leave, release or forsake.

To forgive...it is so much easier said than done. And it's crucial, urgent, necessary, and excruciatingly hard. So this Sunday and next, Pastor Jacob and I will be exploring forgiveness...God's forgiveness (this week) and ours (next week).

Just a word about what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not tolerance; it is not sweeping the offense under the rug. Forgiveness doesn't in any way condone the offense as right, acceptable, or tolerable. If the father in the story had meant to merely tolerate his son's behavior, if he intended to say, "Don't worry about it," he would not have come running down the street to meet him. "Forgiveness is richer ... and harder and more shocking."^{iv} Forgiveness does not minimize hurt or accept wrong as right.

Everything Jesus said and did pointed to one place -- his announcement of God's rule and reign on earth. He called it the Kingdom of God. His first sermon declared, *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.*^v When his contemporaries heard him, they thought, "Finally! We are going to be citizens of God's kingdom, rather than slaves of the Roman Empire." But

oppression and exile, according to the prophets, was the result of Israel's sin. If Israel was going to be set free, the liberation would have to come in the forgiveness of those sins.

Everywhere he went people followed him, begging him to set them free. Whatever was holding them hostage -- debt or disability, disease, poverty, or political tyranny, Jesus' response to the situation was always the same. He would look with compassion at the person and say, *Your sins are forgiven*. John the Baptist did the same thing. He called people to, *Repent... Prepare the way of the Lord*. He was getting them ready for God's liberation. He did it by reenacted the Exodus event, when God delivered their ancestors from slavery to freedom through the Red Sea waters.

Jesus took John's message two steps further. He took it from the river to the streets. He offered absolution; he forgave people. **That** was the shocking, scandalous thing, and it got him in all kinds of trouble. After all, only God can forgive sins.^{vi} Jesus took what had previously been offered only by priests in the Temple out into the streets and handed it out for free! Just who did he think he was?

Jesus is the Kingdom-bringer, the freedom giver. He ate with tax collectors and hung out with sinners. He told stories that depicted God as a woman sweeping the house, turning everything upside down looking for a lost coin (or was that a lost loved one she was seeking?). Jesus described God as a shepherd searching relentlessly for a sheep who had left the fold. Did that sheep just nibble itself lost? Or did it wait until dark and squeeze through an opening in the fence?

The way Jesus told the stories doesn't matter. The message is always the same; God is not counting sins against us. God is handing out amazing grace and radical forgiveness, whether we like it or not.

I know that's hard to accept. We desperately want there to be an economy in the universe where people who do the right thing receive the blessings, and those who do wrong get what's coming to them.

On Calvary, God blew up the idea of getting what we deserve. God announced that our sinful, destructive, human system of blaming the outsider, of scapegoating the weak, and might-makes-right retaliation is NOT the way to justice. A humiliated God, a suffering God, the same God who ran to welcome the prodigal home, our God did not lift a finger to condemn those who put him on the cross. Instead he proclaimed, of all things, forgiveness. With that forgiveness God cut the world loose. As the song says, "My chains are gone; I've been set free. My God, my Savior, has ransomed me."

Jesus entered willingly, sacrificially into the violence caused by sin: ignorance, resentment, and fear. He said, "Stop! It ends here. This is not who you are!" God's forgiveness is like a giant steel saw that can cut through the prison bars of fear and shame. Nothing you can do, no mistake you can make can change that. You can choose to deny it; you can withhold forgiveness from yourself or others, but you can't change the fact that, "Jesus commands us to cut others loose too. It's not a suggestion. Jesus commands us to forgive, just as he commands us to love."^{vii}

If I were writing a parable of God's grace, it might go something like this. The kingdom of God is like an Amish community that suffered unimaginable horror. A deranged man barricaded himself inside a school building. Before the day was over he had killed five and himself, and injured five more.

On the tenth anniversary of the killing an NPR reporter returned to Nickle Mines, Pennsylvania to talk with the killer's mother, Terri Roberts. She spoke of the shame she has born for what her son did.

"We resigned ourselves to the fact that we could never face our neighbors again."

But at the funeral for her son, more than forty of her Amish neighbors stood with her family, silently behind them at a respectful distance.

"You could feel the love emanated from them," she said. She received sympathy cards, and the Amish families brought casseroles.

Terri naturally found it difficult to accept their forgiveness. That kind of forgiveness is shocking, a scandal. But the power of it cannot be denied. Seeing one of the seriously injured children, Terri asked the family if she could help care for her. So nearly every day she comes to bathe and read to Roseanna.

"I will never forget the destruction caused by my son," Terri told the reporter. "But the Amish community's choice to allow life to move forward has been a healing balm for us."^{viii}

The grace of God is like that Amish community. Like that community, God has suffered an unimaginable loss. Accepting God's forgiveness will not make suffering go away, but forgiveness lifts us out of our grief and worry, and allows us to walk in another's shoes. Accepting God's forgiveness makes it possible for us to offer help and grace to those around us: like the Honduran widow fleeing drug gangs with her son, the North Korean farmer whose crop has failed, and the urban teen serving a long sentence for drug possession. Like them, and like the son in Jesus' story, we will arise and go to our Father -- the father of mercy...we'll ask forgiveness...ask for freedom, freedom from the anger and the guilt, freedom from fear, disease, anxiety, addiction and the shame. Forgiveness is the other word for freedom.

What do you think your Heavenly Father's response will be? He will run out to meet you, robes flying, arms embracing saying, "This child of mine was dead and now is alive again, was lost but now is found!"

ⁱ N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, Eerdmans, 2014, 36

ⁱⁱ David Seamands, "Perfectionism: Frought with Fruits of Self-Destruction" *Christianity Today*, April 10, 1981, 24-25 by Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Zondervan, 1997, 15

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 6: 12

^{iv} Wright, op.cit.

^v Mark 1:15

^{vi} Mark 2:7

^{vii} Nadia Bolz-Weber, "A Sermon on Forgiveness" *Sojourners*, September 12, 2011

^{viii} "A Decade after Amish School Shooting, Gunman's Mother Talks of Forgiveness" *NPR Story Corp*, September 30, 2016