

Sermon
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 February 24, 2019
 Luke 7:36-50 Jesus Forgives the Repentant Woman

Simply Complicated

May the words spoken and the words received be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

Jesus makes forgiveness so simple. It is a critical part of Luke's gospel. In fact, not only did Jesus forgive individuals such as the woman in our story today, but while he was hanging in agony on the cross, he forgave the repentant robber, and even forgave those who were executing him saying, "God, forgive them because they don't know what they're doing." But, most of us know that forgiveness feels so much more complicated when the need for it touches us.

As I was preparing to preach this week, I happened to see a post in a Facebook group for UCC clergywomen. One pastor posted that she is preaching on a forgiveness this week, but she was wrestling with the text. Her young adult son was assaulted and ended up with a broken jaw that needed surgery. The police cautioned them about filing charges because the person who assaulted him is part of a criminal gang, and doing so might put him and his family in danger.

After describing the incident, she wrote: "Perhaps you now see the dilemma and struggle of preaching the portion of Jesus' sermon on ...his teachings of loving your enemies. ... I can certainly pray for the person who did this in a pastoral way. I can try to imagine what his life has been like that he needed to find companionship, belonging, and power in such a group willing to commit violent acts. ... Forgiveness ... harder to come by but certainly never conditional on receiving some sense of remorse on the part of the perpetrator."

Even in its complexity, forgiveness ultimately rests on God's mercy.

Have any of you experienced the same feelings as my colleague? I have. Sometimes when we've experienced a deep hurt, forgiveness begins simply with wanting to pray to want to forgive. Yet the gift of forgiveness helps liberate us from the oppression of bitterness and the desire to seek revenge. In my experience, it's not a one-and-done decision, but rather a process. Forgiveness sometimes feels like one step forward and two steps back. Might this be one reason Jesus tells his disciples to forgive 7 times 70 times. With each new step of the journey, we shed some of what weighs us down, and cast a shadow of compassion.

We don't will ourselves into forgiveness. The forgiving heart is a gift of God's love and mercy, a response to grace received. Our openness, or lack thereof, doesn't determine whether we abide in God's love, and in God's forgiveness of us. God asks us to share that same kind of love with one another. Now, that doesn't mean that in community there aren't steps to be taken to restore relationship where there's been injury. In fact, there are situations in which reconciliation is neither possible nor something to aspire to. Regardless of whether reconciliation is possible, one of the fruits of forgiveness is peace, which is what Jesus offered the woman in this morning's scripture whom he forgave.

The woman in our story knelt at Jesus' feet. Tears of humility, pain, and maybe even hopefulness fell onto his dusty skin, and she wiped them with her hair. She brought expensive oil to lavish on the one she hoped would save her.

Her sin isn't named, but there is an implication of sexual immorality. "If Jesus truly was a

prophet and knew who this woman was,” the Pharisees thought, “he wouldn’t stand for it.” Interestingly enough, it isn’t the woman but the Pharisees who are the recipients of Jesus’ lesson. He had nothing but compassion for the woman. He allowed her to touch him even though it was a serious social breach for a non-related female to touch a man. He received her gift, praised her faith, and sent her in peace. Apparently she didn’t require a lecture. But the Pharisees did. These leaders who could recite the law of Moses and be conformed to strict religious observances still didn’t understand what Jesus was trying to do. They had no compassion but for the woman, only scorn.

The ones who seem to be in the greatest need of forgiveness in this story are the Pharisees. They were power brokers; they led a privileged life. The woman who knelt at Jesus’ feet was a nobody. Let’s assume she was a prostitute. Likely she is without a husband or father or son to protect and provide for her. Perhaps she is even a widow, maybe a mother trying to feed her children. In her cultural context, women were not typically allowed to be beneficiaries of property or owners of businesses. Most were completely dependent upon male relatives. Options for supporting oneself and one’s children were extremely limited.

A pastor I met who worked with sex workers in San Francisco insisted on talking about prostituted women, not women who were prostitutes. The former is a more accurate term about what happens *to* women, and is related to circumstances. The latter presumes a free choice of profession *by* women. Most prostituted women, she said, do not make a such a conscious choice and this is not their preference. Rather, their circumstances leave them with few options—either because of economic need or because of threat of violence for not complying. It would have been thus in the context of our scripture, to an even greater degree.

We can read Jesus’ lecture to the Pharisees as bigger than an individual person whom he forgives. Read in this way, it’s an indictment of the very structure that gave rise to the sin—which isn’t so much her specific behavior as it is society’s placing the woman in such a vulnerable position to begin with.

We need to hear how God is speaking to us, in our contemporary culture. Not only is this story about the grace of individual forgiveness for individual sin, but also for corporate forgiveness for cultural sin. We need to speak about the need for forgiveness for racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and the many other sinful schemes that we are consciously and unconsciously enmeshed in by virtue of our social location. This sin is embedded in our social and government structures. It’s not hard to find examples. For years we’ve allowed women’s bodies to be used as political pawns, and this is still happening with policies invoked in recent days. And we have been learning more and more about immigration policies that put children in cages and criminalize those who are seeking asylum.

Even the Church isn’t free of the need for repentance and asking for forgiveness. We’ve been hearing much about sex abuse scandals and intentional coverup. The global United Methodist Church is meeting this week in St. Louis to determine whether scriptural references to homosexuality, 7 out of over 31,000 verses, none of which come from Jesus, will cause a schism in the church. There are congregations in our United Church of Christ who reject a wide welcome. And even here at Community of Hope we have differences about how much a preacher should talk about the social aspects of the Gospel and whether signs and symbols of our Open and Affirming Covenant belong in the sanctuary, and, like every community, choices about interpersonal communication can cause injury and division.

An integral and indispensable part of understanding our need for repentance and forgiveness for this kind of corporate and cultural sin is to hear the anguish of the people whose

lives are being destroyed. For example, those of us who are white need to hear and have compassion for people of color who continue to testify to the violence of living in a culture imbued with white supremacist ideology. Straight folk need to understand that those of us with a different orientation are not yet safe from spiritual, physical, and emotional harm. Cisgender people need to listen to transgender folk and those who are non-binary and stand in solidarity with what they need to live whole and safe lives.

Whether we are the ones who need to be forgiven--individually or corporately--or are ones who need to forgive, we need to circle back to God's mercy. It all comes down to that, and is that simple. We are a forgiven people, because that's the nature of God. But we are complex creatures living in complicated contexts.

May the assurance of God's mercy help us accept God's forgiveness, even when we don't believe we deserve it or when cultural sin seems immutably entrenched. And may we fall back on that when others need our forgiveness, knowing that God can forgive even our reluctant hearts. We ask for these things, trusting that God's desire for us and all of creation is liberation and love. Amen.