

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Praying Like Jesus: Forgive Us as We Forgive”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Luke 15:11-24  
Matthew 6:9-13

They came before our committee one by one. Each one telling their story of the abuse or sexual harassment they had suffered at the hands of a minister, an elder or a church member. And these people were not from another denomination, but they were all Presbyterians, describing the acts of other Presbyterians. They came before our committee at General Assembly because they believed that the denomination had let them and others down. They came because our committee had overtures before us that were intended to strengthen our processes for reporting and dealing with those who abuse others. And as they came it began to dawn on me that I hadn't really understood forgiveness. I didn't understand because I had confused forgiveness and reconciliation. I had assumed that they were the same, but they were not. So, as we explore this part of the prayer this morning, “forgive us our debts as we have forgiven the debts of others,” I want to define reconciliation, forgiveness and then how they work together. But first some background.

When God created, God created human beings that were capable of living in right relationship with God and with one another. When any of those relationships were broken by abuse, violence or any other action, God desired that those relationships be restored; that they be healed. This process of healing was called reconciliation. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is no more and no less than an openness to be willing to reconcile. That's it. Forgiveness is no more and no less than an openness to be willing to reconcile. It is not feeling good about someone who hurt us. It is not letting an unrepentant abuser back into our lives. It is not about making excuses for someone who causes us pain. It is simply an openness to be willing to reconcile. With those two definitions in mind, I want to spend a few minutes talking about how reconciliation happens so that forgiveness can fully operate.

The first step in reconciliation is repentance. Repentance means that the one who broke the relationship through violence, anger or any other action, must acknowledge their complicity and work to change themselves so that they do not do it again. It is not simply saying, I'm sorry. It is doing the hard work of being different. It is a literal turning from acting in one way, that of harm, to acting in another way, that of love and grace. And this is a difficult thing for most of us to do. It is difficult because we must acknowledge our guilt. Rather than doing this, what we want to do is blame the victim. It was their fault. They tempted me. They looked at me wrong. What this blaming does is break the relationship even more. Only by being like the younger son in the Luke 15 story and acknowledging our failings, can reconciliation begin to be accomplished. Only by saying, “Father I have sinned against you and heaven, and I do not deserve anything from you,” and then working to be different, can reconciliation be possible.

The second step in reconciliation is accountability. This is perhaps the most difficult step in the reconciliation process because those who do harm must not only acknowledge that they are at fault, repent, but they should suffer the consequences of those actions. What those who came before our committee made

clear to us, was that those who abused them, if they had been willing to repent, wanted to walk away from the consequences. Ministers, elders or even members who victimized others would try and go to another church or perhaps leave the ministry so no one would force them to face their victims and accept the discipline of the church or perhaps even the legal system. Though I know that this sounds judgmental, that they need to accept the consequences of their actions, but what we need to remember is that, though God is a God of mercy, God is also a God of justice. God demands that those who break relationships through harming others, suffer the consequences of their actions so those who are harmed will know that God is with them; that they, the victims, matter to God. For if there is no justice then it says that the pain and hurt of the victims does not matter. Again, returning to our story, we see how this works. When the father goes outside to the older son, he reminds the son that everything that the father has is his. In other words, the consequences of the younger son's having taken his share of the inheritance is that there is no more for him. The younger son is held accountable.

The third step in reconciliation is healing. This third step requires the victimizer to give the victim time to heal. You and I live in a society in which we expect everything to happen immediately. Often, we expect the same thing of forgiveness. We say things like, haven't you forgiven them already. God wants you to forgive so you need to do it now. God won't forgive you unless you forgive, hurry up. When we say those things, what we often mean is, why haven't you been reconciled? Why haven't you patched things up? What this does is that it weaponizes forgiveness. We have made it a weapon to force reconciliation before the person is ready; before the abuser has repented or taken accountability, before the victim has had time to heal from the pains inflicted upon them. For you see that pain is inflicted not simply by physical means, but by words and deeds at home, at the office, on the internet or to others around us. To be reconciled requires time to heal. Again, we see this in the story when the father goes to the elder son who is not ready to reconcile with his younger brother, leaves him the time and space to do so. Nothing is forced. Nothing is required. The father lets the son heal.

Several years ago, I told you about my friend Suzanne in San Antonio. She had grown up on a farm south of the city. When her parents died they left the farm, the farm house and all the contents and equipment to the eldest brother. Suzanne was not upset about that because all she wanted was a picture of her and her mother, that her mother had promised her. After the memorial service she asked her brother about it. He told her not only could she not have the picture, but if she set foot on his property he would have her arrested. Their relationship was broken. Years later after hearing one of my sermons on forgiving seventy times seven. She decided to look up her brother and try and mend the relationship. Once again, he threatened to have her arrested. Then, about three years ago, their only other sibling died. At the memorial service she realized that her brother was there and coming toward her. He said, "Suzanne I am sorry for the way I have treated you. I ask your forgiveness. Can you come by the house and visit?" Her answer was yes. At that moment, Suzanne had a choice. She could treat her brother like she had been treated, or she could forgive. She could be open to reconciliation. She chose the latter, and ultimately because she forgave, and her brother did the work; they were reconciled.

The challenge for us is to do the same. If we have been hurt, the challenge is to forgive, to be open to the possibility of reconciliation. If we have harmed someone else, the challenge is to do the hard work of reconciliation, hoping the other will forgive. Here then is my challenge for the week, how am I being open to reconciliation with those around me, that I may play my part in the process of reconciliation?