

Today and next week we wrap up our preaching series on two spiritual practices on the way to the cross: Lament and Forgiveness. We look today at the spiritual practice of forgiveness. “The Christian faith is indelibly marked by the invitation to receive, and the imperative to offer, forgiveness. Forgiveness is the fountain from which new life flows in a wounded, strife-weary world. Yet, Christians differ widely in their interpretations of how forgiveness should be practiced. Regardless, what is the core of this powerful gift we’re called to participate in? And how do we get past some of our emotional barriers to real forgiveness?” (Marjorie Thompson, *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study*). And how do we determine who needs forgiveness? Jesus taught in parables- relatable stories that could be easily remembered and retold. Some lessons are so scandalous that only a story, or a picture or an image can describe them. Jesus says “let me tell you a story about a man who had two sons...” Today we’re going to explore forgiveness through the long, familiar parable of the Prodigal Son. Or maybe it should be called the Lament of the Responsible Older Child or the parable of Two Sons or the parable of the Dysfunctional Family. This story takes place as the third of three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and then this parable. Jesus offers these three parables after taking some heat from other religious folk and legal experts for the kind of company he’s keeping- mainly a bunch of sinners- which were not an acceptable crowd for a teacher of the law to be hanging out with. In today’s parable, some of us identify with the younger son, while others of us identify with the older. Before diving in, let us pray. **PRAY. READ. Luke 15:1-2; 11-32.**

Upon first glance some of us may think we know this story well. So well, in fact, that we may assume that only one of the three main characters in this story needs forgiveness. After all, it is the younger son who does the unthinkable and demands his portion of his inheritance from his very much alive father. "In traditional Near Eastern culture, this would have been inexcusable behavior in its own right but then he took that money- because the father gave it to him- and blew it all- his entire fortune. There are some things that we aren't told in this story. Things such as what caused him to want to leave in the first place? The last straw of embarrassment for the father would likely have been the youngest son hiring himself out to a pig farmer, defiling himself with unclean animals" (Thompson). Certainly this young man needs to turn himself around and seek forgiveness- repent for his sins. He envied those pigs and their food, and this desperate son "comes to himself"- comes to his senses- we're told- which could mean many things- it could mean that he genuinely repented or the cynic in me wonders if he was just being crafty and manipulative. Regardless, he decides that he can go and be treated like a hired hand for his dad rather than starving to death, not even offered pig slop to eat. So he set off to go back to his father- a father who acts nothing like a typical Middle Eastern patriarch. I imagine returning took some swallowing of pride. I'm trying hard to find the tender places where the younger son really lives and who he is under the labels of "prodigal" and "sinner." He practiced his return speech but before he could get the words out of his mouth, while he was still far off, his father saw him and filled with compassion, he ran to hug and kiss his son. Then mid embrace the son got a few words out but his father

interrupted him calling on his servants to bring his lost but now found son everything that would assure him that he's back in the family. And they celebrated with a fattened calf. Now, wouldn't it be lovely if this parable ended there?! I love the picture of a God who will do anything to meet us where we are and offer unmerited grace and mercy. I like that ending. But this story is not so simple. No. This man had two sons both of whom were lost and needed forgiveness, including the one who never left. Perhaps Jesus intended for those hearing to see themselves in multiple characters of this story. I realized preparing for today's sermon that in my 20+ years of preaching, I have NEVER preached this most memorable parable. I wondered why. Maybe because it's a little too close to home? I'm not an older brother but an older sister- the oldest grandchild. I won't lie. I struggle with the unfairness of this parable just like I do with the parable of the workers in the vineyard. We don't hear from the older brother until after the party begins. One can sense his alienation. Talk about feeling left out? No one even bothered to come and get him to join the celebration. He finds out about it by walking up to the festivities after working in the field all day. Naturally he wonders what is going on and asks one of the servants to give him the scoop. Upon hearing of the metaphorical red carpet that has been rolled out for his irresponsible brother, he refuses to go in. Notice that just as the father came out to greet his younger son, he also leaves the celebration to beg his older son to join the party. The older brother loses it...he laments. "Listen! After all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate

with my friends. But when this son of yours {notice he didn't say "my brother"} came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (vv. 29-30). "Theologians tell me that I'm supposed to look at the older brother and see self-righteousness, arrogance, and unholy spite. But I see pain" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). It must be the oldest child connection. I'm used to being responsible and getting things done, and I care about fairness and justice a lot. My siblings may even say that I have some self-righteous indignation and they are probably right; however, they also have a hard time recognizing when I am hurting and resentment can build over time. Again, we don't know the full story nor how it ends with these two sons and their father. Does the younger brother start pulling his own weight? Does he apologize to his brother? Does the older brother go into the party or not? How long does his bitterness and wounded pride fester? Did his father shrink in his eyes as his anger grew? After all, it was his father who said, "We have to celebrate and rejoice." The knowledge that you're right is cold comfort when you are all alone. Though the younger son may be the guest of honor at the party, the party is just as necessary for the elder as it is for the younger. The younger brother has gone inside; he's done breaking hearts for the time being. Now the father stands in the doorway waiting for his older son to stop being lost. Waiting for him to take hold of the last of the inheritance that has always been his (Thomas). Will his inability to let go of his rightness and embrace his brother as his brother keep him from experiencing God's grace?

Lutheran Pastor, Nadia Bolz Weber, says “There are times in my own life when I’ve been hurt and I’m sure retaliation would make me feel better. But then when I can’t harm the person who harmed me, I just end up harming the people who love me. So maybe retaliation, or holding on to anger about the harm done to us, or living in fear of it happening again, doesn’t actually combat evil; it feeds it. Now, in all fairness I should say that I myself don’t *naturally* have a forgiving heart. I love a good resentment as much as the next gal. Holding onto a grudge or a resentment can feel like a big delicious feast I can return to again and again until I realize I am the main course. Our refusal to forgive can eat us alive (<https://sojo.net/articles/sermon-forgiveness>).

She was the oldest girl in a family of eight siblings on a farm and with that came lots of responsibility. One of those responsibilities- which she resented for many years- was helping to raise her youngest brother. Dorothy loved Johnny. She adored him really though he drove her crazy. I knew him as “Uncle Johnny, but he was my great uncle. We would sometimes see him when we visited his sister, my maternal grandmother, and his mother, my great-grandmother. I didn’t know his older children as well, but I knew his youngest son, Jeffrey, who was my age. I grew up seeing Jeffrey at the homeplace, and we would often play outside together. Jeffrey was kind of a loner at times. He was a chubby kid, who was a jokester, and was often bullied at school. Fast forward to when I was 20 years old. Jeffrey, high on drugs, killed his dad- Uncle Johnny. Jeffrey knew that his dad and mom would be coming home with a lot of cash, as they were leaving on vacation that next day. Jeffrey tried

to wait for his mom to come home so he could do the same to her but he got spooked and left. My grandmother, Mama Dot, was devastated, and she was angry. Rightfully so. She and her other two sisters were right there with her. But Mama Dot seemed to take Johnny's death the worst. They had a special bond. Mama Dot was so angry that she refused to look at Jeffrey, moreover, to go and visit him in prison. She and her sisters would go to each hearing to make sure that Jeffrey remained in prison. But she was also in prison, so to speak. My grandmother never forgave Jeffrey- not even upon his premature death of an asthma attack in prison. Mama Dot refused to attend Jeffrey's funeral. She wanted nothing to do with this "monster" that killed her Johnny. You see bitterness is a destructive and self-destructive power. Mama Dot was haunted, eaten up by Johnny's murder. It was shameful and embarrassing to have something terrible like this happen. No one talked about it at all. As Mama Dot said to my mom over the phone in disbelief shortly after Johnny's death, "Our family hasn't even gotten a traffic ticket. This kind of thing is not supposed to happen for us. If only Jeffrey weren't in this family." A few years after this tragedy, I entered seminary with this dysfunctional family story heavy on my heart. Mama Dot was so proud of me and yet, her joy was not complete. I could see it in her eyes. Her unwillingness to forgive (which is always so much easier said than done) was aging her. I so badly wanted to have a conversation with her- reminding her that in the heart of God there's enough forgiveness when we don't have enough, but I never did. Not even a month into my time in seminary, Mama Dot was killed along with my great aunt in a car accident. I've wondered at times how her story

could have been different had she chosen to let go of her resentment and contempt towards Jeffrey- to be released from all that bitterness. She wasn't ready to forgive but maybe she could've recognized his and her own brokenness. She couldn't see past her own anger and resentment. **Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting or condoning a wrong. Forgiveness may not take away our pain- it may not even be acknowledged or accepted- yet the act of offering it will keep us from being sucked into the downward spiral of resentment. Through forgiveness, we're set free.** I wonder about the barriers in my own heart keeping me from the party- blocking me from experiencing the love and forgiveness and grace I know is real in Jesus Christ. What about you? What barriers are in your heart- keeping you from the grace-filled party? From God's scandalous, forgiving love? God invites us to the table of grace, yet allows us to write this ending. What will you choose? Amen.