

Self-Examination: A Prelude to Forgiveness
Luke 15:1-7, 11-32
Psalm 51
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This week we begin the season of Lent: a forty-day period of repentance and self-examination. To guide our meditation this year we will be following along in Marjorie Thompson's book *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study*. I encourage you to pick up a copy at the church office and follow along. It is a helpful and accessible devotional guide.

Thompson begins by naming how central forgiveness is for those of us who seek to follow Jesus Christ. She says: "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."

We know that weariness, don't we? Whether it's the weariness of strife in our marriage, or the weariness of resentments in our family, or the weariness of divisions in our community, or the weariness of arguments in the office, or the weariness of conflict in our country or our world ... we know how exhausting strife can be.

What I hope we'll come to know just as deeply is this: that following Christ really brings new life. Christ offers refreshment to our spirits, and freedom to our souls. So let's begin the work of forgiveness now.

Luke 15:1-7, 11-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. ...

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son

gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For 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 came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

It's clear from the start who really needs forgiveness in this story. The Prodigal Son has done everything wrong:

- He demanded his inheritance while his father was still alive – which is akin to saying to his father, “I wish you were dead.”
- He distanced himself from his family, running away from his father as far as he could go.
- He squandered his inheritance – none of which he himself had earned – and wasted it on “dissolute living,” on drugs and alcohol and prostitutes and every other pleasure of the flesh.
- He spent his money so irresponsibly that when a famine hit, he had nothing to live on, no reserves, no back-up plan to go on.
- He disregarded his family's name so utterly that he hired himself out to take care of pigs – which were, of course, religiously unclean.

He was selfish, disrespectful, irresponsible ... And we know people like that, don't we? Perhaps we've even been that person – some of us, almost literally. And others of us, well, we disregarded duty and morals and obedience in other ways. We thought if climbing the ladder of success meant that we had to step on other people, or buy off other people, so be it. We thought if our family's values were too strict for our bohemian taste, we would just do our own thing. We thought we had the right to cut in front of the person in front of us, because our appointment was far more important than anything else ... or we had the right to sleep with our assistant because we are the boss, after all ... or we had the right to little white lies or “memory lapses” or plagiarism because our reputation was on the line. In short, just like the Prodigal Son, we thought we were *entitled*.

Or maybe we didn't even think at all. Maybe we just let our urges get the best of us, with no thought of the consequences.

But if you are sitting in this sanctuary, you likely resonate with what happens next to the younger son: “he came to himself.” He remembered who he *really* was: not an isolated individual but a member of a family, the beloved child of his father. And when he “came to himself,” he made the decision to turn around and go home to his father's house. Turning around – that is what the Biblical word for repentance literally means. And perhaps you know that too.

But the story doesn't end there, does it? What the Prodigal Son didn't anticipate was that *all* that was required of him was to come home. Notice what happens:

- As soon as the Father sees his son, the Father goes running toward him. The Father doesn't wait for an apology.
- As soon as the son starts talking, the Father interrupts him and tells his servants to get the cloak of honor and put it on his wayward son.
- As soon as the son is clothed in honor, the Father sacrifices the very best, the fatted calf, for him, and doesn't just celebrate in secret. He gathers the whole town at the table to honor his wayward son who has come home.

And so it is with us. The Father's actions towards his son - this is who God outreach to us too:

- Running towards us with compassion, not even requiring an apology.
- Interrupting our confession, and throwing the cloak of honor on us in our shame.
- Spreading a lavish feast in our honor, and publicly celebrating our return.
- Loving us not when we are obedient and praise-worthy, but when we are at our most unworthy.

And maybe you've been there too. Maybe you've been met with compassion when you've been guilty. Maybe you've been clothed in honor when you've been ashamed. Maybe you've been welcomed to a joyful feast when you expected to be shunned. And what Jesus is telling us is this: that is how it's *supposed to be* in God's house.

But some of us ... some of us don't always like it.

The older son – the faithful, hard-working, loyal, dutiful, genuinely obedient older son - is *appalled* at his Father's behavior. He becomes angry and resentful. He turns his back and refuses to go in to his Father's house. Even when his Father comes out to meet him where he is, even when the Father humbles himself to beg and plead, the older son defies him:

- The older son feels unappreciated: "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command."
- He feels taken for granted: "you have never given me even a young goat so that I -might celebrate with my friends."
- He feels cheated: "when this son of yours" – notice that he doesn't name the Prodigal as *his own brother!* – "when this *son of yours* came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

- And needless to say, he will hate his Father’s answer: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

And my guess is, we have *all* been in *that* place. Feeling taken for granted. Feeling angry. Feeling resentful. Unwilling to forgive too easily. Maybe unwilling to forgive at all.

But here’s what Jesus testifies: whether we like it or not, this is *who God is*. Like it or not, *we can’t change God*. God will always be the one who shares *everything* with us – when we deserve it, and when we don’t; when we are holy, and when we are unworthy. God will always be the one who loves every one of us, God’s children: those who are lost, and those who have never left; those who are repentant of their sins, and those who are resentful at the wideness of God’s mercy.

I can’t know where you stand right now. I only know that my own heart, at different times, has careened from resentment to guilt, from shame to anger, from gratitude to sullenness, from self-righteousness to humility.

And this much I also know: this season of Lent is our chance to look closely at our own hearts and recognize our feelings and our failures. This season of Lent is our chance to “come to ourselves,” to acknowledge our sins and shortcomings, to repent and turn around. This season of Lent is our chance to unburden ourselves of both the guilt *and* anger we carry; both the shame *and* self-righteousness that weigh us down. This season of Lent is our chance to remember: to remember who – and whose – we really are. Amen.

Invitation to Confession

Christ our Lord longs for us to come home, to come to ourselves, to sit at table with him, and to break bread in peace with one another. Yet we resist his invitation.

In this season of Lent, let these stones become the image of the weight of our sin that we carry with us needlessly:

- The sin of our brokenness, which weighs us down when we deny our guilt.
- The sin of our failure, which weighs us down when we cling to our shame.
- The sin of our judgment, which weighs us down when we cling to our anger, and carry our resentment like a badge of honor.

- The sin of our self-righteousness, which weighs us down when we pretend that we are holier-than-thou, and ignore our need for grace.

Each time we are unable or unwilling to forgive ourselves or someone else, it is like a stone that burdens us needlessly. For Christ came to reconcile us to ourselves, to God and to one another - not only for our own sake, but so that we might be his ambassadors, sent out in the ministry of reconciliation.

Each Sunday in Lent, you are invited to bring a stone from home, or to take a stone from these baskets, and to name in your heart what this stone represents. Then you are invited to come forward during this time of confession, to lay it down, and ask the Lord to take this burden from you, as you begin to accept Christ's ministry of forgiveness. We will watch the containers fill as we name and lay down our burdens each week. And each week we will sing together a prayer of forgiveness.

The congregation is invited to come forward now and place a stone in the glass jars on the chancel.

Laying Down the Burden of our Sin

Julia Rigoni, soloist

“Before I Take the Body of My Lord,” Hymn #428

*Before I take the body of my Lord, before I share his life in bread and wine,
I recognize the sorry things within: these I lay down.*

*The words of hope I often failed to give, the prayers of kindness buried by my pride, the signs
of care I argued out of sight: these I lay down.*

*The narrowness of vision and of mind, the need for other folk to serve my will,
and every word and silence meant to hurt: these I lay down.*

*Of those around in whom I meet my Lord, I ask their pardon and I grant them mine, that every
contradiction of Christ's peace might be laid down.*

*Lord Jesus, companion at this feast, I empty now my heart and stretch my hands,
and ask to meet you here in bread and wine which you lay down.*

Prayer of Confession: Psalm 51 (responsively)

Leader: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;

People: **according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.**

Leader: Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

People: **For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.**

Leader: Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,

People: **so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.**

Leader: Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

- People: **You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.**
- Leader: Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- People: **Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.**
- Leader: Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
- People: **Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.**
- Leader: Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- People: **Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.**
- Leader: Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.
- People: **Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.**
- Leader: For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
- People: **The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.**

Invitation to Silent Confession

Assurance of Pardon

- Leader: The Almighty and merciful Lord grant you absolution and remission of all your sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit.
- People: **May it be so, O Lord,
not because I am worthy, but because you are both mighty and merciful;
not because I can absolve myself,
but because you have chosen to cleanse me in the breath-taking love of Jesus;
not because I can be perfect, but because you alone can remake me,
amend me, resurrect me;
not because I may ever be able to forgive myself
but because your grace has already let me overcome my shame;
and in your forgiveness of me, has opened a place in my heart for love.**

Sung Response (unison)

*Before I take the body of my Lord, before I share his life in bread and wine,
I recognize the sorry things within: these I lay down.*