

THE ROAD CALLED FORGIVENESS
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Luke 7:36-8:3
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Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*, ends with these famous lines:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Today I want talk about a road less traveled, the road called forgiveness. Our world is not always forgiving, and our children grow up where "grace" is not necessarily a familiar word. What IS normal is competition that lends itself not so much to the idea of grace but competition based on the mistakes or inadequacies of others. Today's sermon has three parts. The first is to look at the road called forgiveness on a personal level as talked about in today's gospel text. The second is to look at how a whole community does or does not foster forgiveness. And the third is a disclaimer about what forgiveness is not. First, let's look at our gospel text. As is often the case in Luke, Jesus teaches the reign of God by befriending the very people he was not supposed to be seen with, outcasts of one kind or another, often women. In this story, a woman's expression of gratitude welling up from a deep sense of acceptance and forgiveness, and demonstrated by her washing Jesus' feet with tears of joy, becomes *the* teachable moment.

In Jesus' day, "table fellowship," (that is, who you had over for dinner) showed whether you were part of the in-crowd or the out-crowd. This woman had *not* been invited to share table fellowship at the home of Simon, the Pharisee. But she came knowing that whether or not she was invited, she would be welcomed there (not by Simon) but by Jesus. The woman sought forgiveness. Jesus had this holy presence about him that exuded the aura of God's forgiveness and love. Who Jesus was, what he did, and the words he spoke seemed to declare in a profound way God's forgiveness. Actually, the woman was already forgiven. Jesus was pronouncing what already was and her response was gratitude for knowing God forgave her, loved her, and accepted her even if no one else in town did. To be close to Jesus meant that this woman could *feel* the presence of God, who knew her completely for who she was and accepted her and her offering of precious oil, her offering of herself. Simon, on the other-hand, was not so forgiving. His road was the well-traveled road called "you get what you deserve." Since Simon was a "righteous" man and doing everything right, he had little need for grace. Simon was so busy trying to be superhuman perfect that he had little empathy for what it meant to be human and to struggle with the complexities of life and the temptation to let oneself be compromised. Simon's very self-worth depended on this pretense of righteousness. Self-righteousness, excluded Simon from the inclusive community that Jesus spoke of.

Most Sundays either explicitly or implicitly through prayer, word, or song, we make confession. Confession is not so much a recitation of individual failures, but rather the freedom to say "this is who I am." And because we confess as a community it says "this is who we are" and thus, we are bound together by truth-telling and our common humanity. Two words we need to teach our children to use often and un-

ashamedly are the words: "I'm sorry." And the best way to teach is to model by saying "I'm sorry", to make confession. Whereas, the woman in Luke's gospel could tell the truth about her life, Simon could not and that made all the difference.

Although the gospel story focuses on forgiveness on a deeply personal level, I am as much disturbed by what appears to be a lack of communal grace in our society and world. In the scripture account of King David we read a striking example that resembles our world today. When King David is near death, he calls Solomon, his son, and gives him these parting words. "Be strong and courageous, and keep the ways of the Lord." Then, he continues, "Moreover, you know what Joab did to me; well, go after him! And also Shimei who I swore I would never put to death, but I want you to do it." King David is asking Solomon to complete his own revenge. What has happened to the shepherd boy in whom so much hope and promise for Israel rested, in whom a great kingdom was established? The hallmarks of David's early kingdom was a grace and mercy not known before. Wisdom, mercy, and justice was what had made Israel strong. Now, at his death, David's kingdom has become one where power and revenge is the norm rather than forgiveness and mercy. Over time and partly because of his own sin, David's kingdom has changed from a kingdom of generosity and forgiveness to a power hungry kingdom filled with betrayers who surround David and in the end strip him of power. David is so beaten down by betrayers, including his sons, that his real character has died long before his body dies. In his kingdom, so hostile to mercy and generosity, David simply acquiesces what has become normal asking Solomon to complete his final revenge. The parent passes on an ethic of power and ruthlessness to the child. Instead of a community of covenant, hope, and blessing, the kingdom of Israel, as perpetuated from father to son, has become a community of destruction and death. Israel had become so perverse that there was no framework for forgiveness to flourish.

A few years ago the Discover magazine wrote about experiments where scientists constructed computer models of societies comprised of several types of players--those who always cooperated, those who always betrayed, those who responded tit-for-tat (that is they did to others what was done to them), or generous tit-for-tat, a player which every now and then responded cooperatively even when betrayed, responded shall we say with forgiveness. In the earliest stages of the model, those who betrayed often won and produced progeny, but as time went on the tit-for-tat players became dominant because they were tough on betrayers but also were willing to cooperate. The mutual benefits of cooperation allowed for more progeny, increasing the number of cooperative players. This meant that cooperation gained a foothold in the society. In the very long run, the type of player who dominated in numbers was generous tit-for-tat, who responded to occasional betrayals with generosity, thus not perpetuating cycles of betrayal in the society. What is interesting is that in order for "generous tit-for-tat" to flourish there had to be a significant number of cooperators that supported and provided an environment that reinforced the benefits of cooperation and produced increasing numbers of progeny with that same ethic. In religious language, the computer program had resulted in a culture of grace!

We are called by God to provide a similar community where grace and forgiveness is increasingly demonstrated. We are to model justice, mercy, and forgiveness so that the kingdom of God is an on-going presence in society. As the church we try to end the perpetuation of cycles of betrayal or societies comprised of "them and us." To do this we must offer a field of force called grace and surround each other and every member of society with generosity, compassion, and mercy. We must make room for God's spirit to intervene with novelty, and we must be instruments for that novelty in a culture where children are often taught to perpetuate the ethics of betrayal or tit-for-tat.

Now for the disclaimer. I remember years ago during the OJ Simpson murder trial, our daughter, Brittany asking: "If OJ is guilty, do we have to forgive him." The church has sometimes preached a message of forgiveness which has been interpreted as, "Stay where you are, forgive the spouse that beats you." Or the message has been interpreted to mean that we can't call to account the injustice we see or experience, because after all we're not perfect either. Forgiveness is not putting up with evil! Jesus was angry when he observed injustice and oppression. Jesus did not hesitate to tell the truth about what was wrong or evil in his culture. Years ago a friend of mind who worked with battered women, suggested the church offer these words to abusers: "I love you enough to hold you accountable." I believe this is what Jesus would have said, and what we might say to injustice of any kind. "We love you enough to hold you accountable." It's telling the truth in love.

We must rise up in anger and with action when the web of life is being torn apart. If a child dies because of a brain infection resulting from an abscessed tooth which his mother couldn't find a dentist to pull; we all die a little. In case you missed this story in the news, a 12 year old boy couldn't get his tooth pulled for \$80, spent two weeks in the hospital for \$250,000, and the brain infection killed him. If a person dies a violent death, a small part of all of us dies. If the web is ripped apart by a mean, unforgiving spirit, or by a self-righteous spirit (like Simon's) who separates his or her strand of the web from the rest of humanity, the web will be less like the kingdom of God. Our web must be woven of justice, mercy, and compassion, made strong by forgiveness and truth-telling.

Like the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, may we feel overcome by the forgiveness of God so that our lives are a grateful expression of God's love for us. May we create a reconciling community for all children where they know the meaning of grace and thereby, grow up to be gracious. And may we be truth-tellers for the sake of justice, not afraid to "love enough to hold each other accountable" so that true forgiveness can take place. Together let us journey the road called forgiveness, the road less traveled, because doing so will make all the difference.