

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The Prodigal and Elder Sons

What Do You Think?

Will unconditional forgiveness
enable the prodigal to return to dissolute living again
or will it convert him to responsible behavior?

(Art of Parables by Charles McCollough, p. 103)



Rembrandt van Rijn

The Return of the Prodigal Son

“Our Welcome Home”

Before returning, there is departure,
Before forgiveness, there is estrangement.

Henri J.M. Nowen

The Bible story for my four year old Sunday School class was the story about Adam and Eve taking a bite of the forbidden fruit and getting kicked out of the garden for disobeying the command of God. When the story was done I asked the children to wonder about the story with me. I said: “I wonder, what did God do after kicking Adam and Eve out of the beautiful place? I wonder what happened to Adam and Eve after they left? And, I wonder what you wonder about this story? Please draw a picture about what you are imagining.” One boy drew a picture of himself and God. Because he was ‘into’ aliens at the time, he drew himself as an alien apple and God as an alien mother apple. When I asked him to tell me about his picture he explained that the alien apple was running loose across the earth terrorizing other little apples. His alien mother apple was up in the sky, flying around trying to find him so that she could stop him from terrorizing everybody. When I asked him if she ever found and stopped him, he said ‘yes’ and smiled. But when the smile turned into a frown I asked him about his frown. He told me that the alien apple was happy when his alien apple mommy found him but sad because he had to stop his terrorizing which he liked doing a lot.

As I see it, those happy and sad feelings in that four year old who was going through the normal growing pains of separating and individuating from his loving parent pointed to the budding of his moral conscience . . .where the powers of guilt and shame live in tension with the spirit of forgiveness. I am sure that he could identify with the happy in the children’s story that followed. “This morning we’re going to talk about getting lost. Have you ever wandered away from your mommy or daddy in a crowd and gotten lost? It’s a pretty scary thing. When a person is lost, all they want to do is get home. Did you know that bees can get lost? That’s right, sometimes when a bee flies away from the bee hive, it can get lost. Baby bees are

especially likely to get lost because they are not used to being out of the hive. But there's a special way that they get back home again. Each bee hive has a certain smell. When a young bee gets lost, the other bees in the hive start fanning their special smell out into the air. All the other bees keep fanning the smell into the air, in the hopes that the baby bee will smell it. When the baby bees pick up on the special smell they follow that smell until it leads them back to the hive. That's how bees work together to bring lost bees back to the hive. In the same way that a baby bee can fly off and get lost from home, sometimes people can turn away from God because they don't think that God will forgive them when they mess up. No one ever told them that more than anything else, God wants them to come home. When Jesus was alive he told his friends that it was their job to help God welcome every soul home. That's why it's up to members of Christ's church, to be like those bees that send out the sweet welcome smell of unconditional forgiveness that says, 'No shame!' Stop what you're doing! Come on home!"

Happy, happy, happy was the four year old. . . until of course, the family came to pick him up and his sad erupted to make him act out. It made him cry, stuck his tongue out at his older brother . . . for which he got a hard Texas slap on the butt from his father. As they left, I imagined that the four year old had thoughts of disowning his family and becoming 'the prodigal son; that the older brother had holier than thou feelings as the victim; that the father was ashamed of his son's baby crying and bad behavior; and that the mother was embarrassed by her husband's knee jerk infantile power play.

In Jesus' day, bringing shame and dishonor to one's family was the worst thing a son or daughter could do. The insult alienated and hardened loved ones hearts. If forgiveness was offered to the offender, it was of the conditional kind. "I'll forgive you only if you never embarrass me again." Conditional forgiveness was and still is a protective move of the ego in the offended to guard against further suffering from the wound of

public shame. It internalizes in the child the message that whatever shames me should also be shaming you. Because it is determined solely by what family and society determined shameful, it lacks the reconciling power to heal grudges, dissolve prejudices, and disarm fears, doubts, and insecurities related to individuation, difference, and unique identity. (Really, is it really shameful to wear white after Labor Day? Or fall down in public?) So when Jesus saw problems with our human kind of conditional forgiving, he told a parable about the kingdom of God in which unconditional forgiveness rules. In his book, 'The God of Jesus', Stephen Patterson concluded: The metaphor for the Kingdom is the father's coming out, both for the younger son and for the elder (p. 125) with an extravagant 'No Shame' welcome home.

I attend the Friday night AA meeting here at First Church whenever I can. At the opening of the meeting they give out chips for lengths of sobriety. When the twenty-four hour, just coming back chip is announced, someone from the group remembers to shout out: "No shame! No judgment!" So what do you think? Will unconditional forgiveness enable a relapse or will a no shame welcome back into the group empower sober behavior? And for our community, is "No Shame" unconditional forgiveness the dynamic essential for returning to church and for reconnecting with others for growth in faith?

The Lenten season is our personal time for becoming aware of our internalized places of human shame and guilt for which we have only conditionally forgiven ourselves. It's our time for feeling the pain of it and for desiring to end to the suffering we bring to ourselves and others because of it. It's our time to receive the unconditional forgiveness of God for a release from our human notions of shame, for enjoying life in God's beloved community, and for participating in the healing of our broken world, sin sick world.

Prayer. Forgiving God, help us to save our "I'm sorry, forgive me" for things that offend you. Amen. '