

The Prodigal Son is one of the more prominent parables in the New Testament. Just about everyone is aware of it. The reason being that there is something in it most people can identify with. There is anger, jealousy, selfishness, greed, betrayal and forgiveness. Forgiveness is the one thing that stands alone in this story.

It begins with the arrogance of a man's son who demands his inheritance while his father is still alive to run off in pursuit of his bodily appetites. Any father knows what his son will experience in such circumstances. That he spent his money wildly is evidence that the boy was totally unprepared for living as a responsible adult. His very actions reveal an emotionally immature brat. Yet, his father let him go, knowing full well that his son was about to learn a very painful lesson in life. He would be used by moochers and hangers-on. Once the wine and money ran out they skipped out on him leaving him to fend for himself, a task he was not capable of. Life for him went from constant, reckless partying to living and eating like a pig.

Do not think his father sat home and never gave his son's departure another thought. Like any father he feared for his son; he knew the pain that would befall him; no doubt the man shared his son's pain: worry, anxiety, regret and fear for his son, even his life, would have gripped his very being.

When the boy returned home, instead of being furious with him, his father ran to him, held him and forgave him. There is power in forgiveness; it carries with it what the confessional prayer in our prayer book refers to as "newness of life." Pg. 75. Jesus said he makes all things new again. Revelation 21:5

But the story contains the opposite of forgiveness as well. It is found in the prodigal's brother. He appears bitter and unforgiving; not at all happy to see his brother returned safe and sound. "You never gave me a party or a ring or an expensive cloak," he said to his father. He is the person who is clearly unhappy in life. He can't see through his anger and bitterness. It controls him. It is he who is the prodigal. He has left the world of human forgiveness and understanding. His brother came home to freedom; he remained in his self acquired prison; a perpetual victim. He is the focus of the remainder of this sermon.

What follows are several true stories about the miraculous power of forgiveness.

Julian of Norwich was a fourteenth century English mystic who offered wise counsel to many who visited her. She was famous for imparting wisdom many believed could only have come from God. After all, she spent her life in prayer, in communion with God. She was an anchoress or one who lived in a cell throughout her life. A room ten foot by ten foot was her home, attached to the church. It had three windows that opened: one to see mass and receive communion, a second through which she took her meals, got rid of her refuse and received personal grooming items. From the third window she would deliver counsel to her many visitors who came to see her. Much can be learned from studying this great saint; hers is a remarkable story.

Fr Robert Llewellyn, recounts the following story in his book about Julian of Norwich, "All Shall be Well." In 1979, five hundred years after her death, a blind, man driven by a constant yearning to visit her shrine went to the place where her cell or enclosure once stood and prayed for understanding. The man who came to visit had been a prisoner of war in Japan during the second world war. His blindness was caused by the severe torture he endured while a captive. He knelt in silence alongside his friend who took him there. At once it became clear to him why he desired to visit the great saint's shrine: Julian herself appeared before him. Adding to the already miraculous event, she brought with her the Japanese soldier responsible for the man's suffering. Though dead, he had come to seek forgiveness from the man he so victimized. Since that horrible time in a prisoner of war camp and what had been done to him, he was never able to get past the bitterness he felt towards his captor.

What happened next is difficult to put into words, much less provide an earthly context. The only person who could see Julian and the Japanese soldier was the blind man, yet still physically blind. His companion overheard him speaking to what must have been the soldier, in Japanese! Suddenly his resentment, stored up in him for some thirty years, left him and he began to weep tears of indescribable joy. Afterwards the blind man and his companion went to the retreat house called All Hallows Convent guest house on the grounds of the shrine and church. While drinking tea served to them by the sisters, Julian appeared before him once again, along with the soldier. Again the blind man emptied his heart and joyfully embraced his freedom, once more, speaking in Japanese. No one there could see the figures, not the sisters not the man's companion, but no one doubted that the scene took place. The fact that the man remained blind but was able to see the figures before him indicates that this was not an experience transmitted through the ordinary channels of seeing as we know it. The man has since died and the story is true.

What occurred there was a power that cannot be adequately described in human terms; it transcends our ability to fully grasp. A power that brings release from a life of bitterness.

In the nineteen nineties, a uniformed New York City Police officer was shot multiple times causing paralysis and the loss of his ability to speak. He spent the next year in a hospital bed, a year that held many set-backs to his progress. It made him angry and frustrated and at times he wasn't sure if he wanted to go on living. He was fortunate to have the love and support of his family and friends and many supporters. It helped get him through a horribly difficult time in his life. Six months after he was felled by a drug crazed person, something happened that gave him a new reason to go on living. His wife gave birth to their first child.

Not long after the birth of their child a press conference was held. His wife did the talking since her husband still could not speak. She told the crowd how grateful her husband was to be alive and proud to be a member of the NYPD. She said as a police officer he had always wanted to help people and that had not changed. Then she stunned the crowd by announcing that her husband had forgiven the man who had tried to murder him.

Ever since that day, people still ask him why he forgave the man; his answer was always the same: "I needed healing," he would say, "and I discovered that the only way forward was to ask God to help me love the disturbed man who tries to kill me." He had learned that one of the most beautiful expressions of love is forgiveness. Many saw this as impossible, illogical even. Not unlike the prodigal's brother. Others said it was absolutely ridiculous; the man had nearly massacred him. But, unlike those who did not understand, he spoke as one who had lived through that incredible experience, they did not.

He listed other reasons why he forgave and the blessings that came with it. "Forgiving is the hardest thing one can do," he said; "but I can tell you, what I've seen and experienced personally: Once you are able to forgive and let go of the wrongs that have been done to you, it changes everything. It will change your relationships, your attitudes, your emotional makeup - your entire approach to life. In addition when you find yourself able to forgive you become the winner." Our older brother in the Gospel today never quite understood this. He was too lost in his bitterness.

The above are two true stories that are about freedom. When they were able to forgive the doors to their prison of victim-hood were thrown open. Released from the stranglehold of unforgiveness.

Forgiveness, can be a door that opens out onto a new life. It's a door not easily passed through; it's narrow, small, leaving little wiggle room, and it's not easily found. Yet, it can be found if one looks in the right place.

But once there, only that person who wishes to forgive can open it.

Forgiveness is not easy to define, but is describing it really the point? it's doing it that matters. It's not about fairness and its demand for an eye for an eye- a biblical verse, few people understand; neither is it about excusing the harm that someone experienced from another. Life is filled with things that can never be excused. Forgiving someone for a mistake or a deliberate hurt has its good points. The pain can be recognized as such but instead of hitting back, looking beyond it can bring about a restoration of the relationship with the person responsible for it. Forgiving someone probably will not take away the pain, it may not even be acknowledged or accepted or admitted, by the person who inflicted it, but the very act of offering it will release the one who is hurt from the smothering effects of resentment and can guard against the temptation of taking out one's anger on someone else. The older brother in today's Gospel reading turned his uncontrollable anger onto his father.

When hurt, a person usually wants to re-visit that source of hurt. However, if we are not careful the pain will turn into resentment and will slowly eat away until it spills over and spawns misery in everything in life, becoming a life controlled by bitterness.

Bitterness has caused more destructive tendencies in this world than all the drug and alcohol abuse in it combined. Staying stuck in bad memories serves only to bring more hurt. Grudges are pointless. The experience though painful has happened; staying angry at it will not change or undo the act. The desire to hit back is just as destructive. Confucius is reported to have said: "He who seeks revenge should dig two graves."

Bitterness, hate, whichever one calls it, can bring much sadness in life and a negative outlook. It possesses power, it can be self-destructive. It thrives in the dark recesses of the heart, feeding on every new thought of spite and hatred that surfaces. Like an ulcer that festers and grows or a heart condition made worse by stress, it can be physically as well as emotionally debilitating. It can even kill a person: alcohol, obesity, drugs, often used to provide a temporary sense of comfort can bring about death."

Reading and doing research on this talk, I came across a man who lives by the following motto: he too underwent a painful, traumatic experience; but he overcame it. "Life," he said, " is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent what you do with it."

There is great wisdom in these words. Life is about choices. We can choose to, or not to do something. The choice is always ours.

There is no greater example of forgiveness than our Lord's suffering on the cross. None of us here or anyone anywhere else will ever be nailed to a cross, much less undergo the indescribable physical pain and mental anguish Jesus endured. It's not possible to relate to it; yet there it is.

A man who was betrayed at every turn, beaten unmercifully and viciously, convicted on drummed up charges in a kangaroo court. Yet, he forgave everyone who participated in what he went through; everyone from those who sneered at him in the street on his way to be crucified, to those who beat him before and on the way, those who lied about him to save themselves, right up to the men who hammered the spikes into his hands and feet, all of them had his blood on their hands, yet he forgave them. Jesus forgave his murderers.

There is a good deal about forgiveness in the Bible, in fact Jesus went so far as to say "if we do not forgive others who sin against us, our Father in heaven will not forgive us our sins." Matthew 6:15. There is a good reason for this. Once again we visit the cross: After the cross there occurred a resurrection. It was our resurrection meaning the forgiveness Christ gave to those who treated him so freed us from the eternal damnation of sin. He forgave us! Forgiveness brings about freedom, a resurrection from a life stalled in perpetuity, by an unwillingness to move on. Forgiveness enables us to be what and who God knows we can be and frees us from whatever it is that prevents us from becoming and being that person.