

## ***Forgiveness Is ... A Process***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC  
March 31, 2019 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Text: Luke 7:56-30

A wise man I know offered me an excellent piece of advice which has stayed with me over the years. This advice, which came in the form of a story that has distinctly Hindu overtones, is about what happens when we try to box up a wrong or a problem, pretending it has been forgiven, relegated to the past and forgotten when reality is anything but. Here's the story.

A man once had an elephant, a very problematic elephant. It wouldn't listen. It was very picky about its food. It didn't like the other elephants or any of the people who were supposed to take care of it. In short, the elephant was a big problem and the man didn't know what to do. So, he had it crated and shipped thousands of miles to another home he owned in a far away country. After weeks on the road, the elephant finally arrived at its new home. The foreman of the estate had the elephant carefully uncrated and led in to its new home. Quickly he realized the elephant was a problem. It wouldn't listen. It was very picky about its food and it didn't really get along with either its handlers or the other elephants on the estate. So, the foreman called the owner of the estate to tell him about the elephant and ask what he should do. The owner upon hearing this news was quite

distressed. “I thought the new location would solve all these problems with the elephant,” he told the foreman. He replied, “sir, why would you think that? You shipped a problem elephant thousands of miles and it got here and it’s still a problem elephant. Why would you think that would change just because you removed it from your sight?”

I was thinking about this story this week as I considered how it is that forgiveness is a process. It is not the “one and done” transaction we like to think it is. Perhaps it is when forgiveness is asked for some minor thing, like when a spouse forgets to pick up milk at the grocery store on the way home even though asked to. That situation is problematic in the moment but has no long-lasting consequences in and of itself, other than a milk shortage in the household. The spouse forgives the momentary lapse on the part of the other spouse and life goes on seamlessly. But, what if this action of forgetting milk is just a tiny piece of a much bigger problem? What if the spouse asked to pick up the milk doesn’t do it because his/her attention is focused elsewhere – like on another person with whom a romantic relationship is developing? Or what if the spouse doesn’t get the milk because he/she spends the milk money on buying lottery tickets to try to win back the household money lost gambling in the casino the week before? If the wrong for which the forgiveness is a problem elephant – like an illicit affair or a serious gambling problem, it will still be a

problem elephant even if forgiveness is requested and granted in the moment.

This is because a momentary memory lapse is very different from a poor decision with serious consequences for everyone involved. The two “wrongs” – sins, if you prefer – are very different in scope and significance and yet we have a tendency to apply the notion of forgiveness equally to the two scenarios. The problem then, dear friends, is not with the forgiveness. The issue becomes the magnitude of the wrong for which forgiveness is asked. And this is where the notion of forgiveness as a process becomes clearer. A momentary lapse can be set aside simply and quickly. The resulting annoyance fades into memory easily. Such is not the case when the wrong-doing is grievous and deeply impactful on the parties involved. Forgiveness is still possible in such situations, but it does not come easily or quickly because that elephant is still an elephant. The problem is still a problem. Forgiveness in such a situation is a process, a journey of recovery that evolves over time with the grace of God. One could argue in such a scenario forgiveness would come as a later step in the recovery process, rather than the first step as we so often think it should be.

This idea of the magnitude of the sin being connected to the amount of forgiveness needed is one of the points of the story we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke. This story of the

woman who is a sinner anointing Jesus can be found, in one form or another, in all four Gospels. In Matthew, Mark and John, the story of the sinful woman who anoints Jesus proceeds the Passion. Indeed, Matthew's version of the story – known as “the woman with the alabaster jar” – is a part of our Palm Sunday Symbols Service in two weeks. In this story, along with the one in Mark and John, the woman's anointing of Jesus is understood as foreshadowing Jesus' death and burial. Not so in the story in today's version of the story from Luke which is set much earlier in the timeline of Jesus' ministry because the point of the story for Luke is not Jesus' impending death, but forgiveness, and the love it illustrates.

Luke's version of the story contains many hidden layers which we often gloss over too quickly. For one thing, most of us – respected biblical scholars included – assume the woman is a prostitute. Scholars of all sorts do this because of the woman's brazen behavior in just coming in and touching Jesus as she did. Only a prostitute would do that, they reason. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, early church father Hippolytus of Rome first conflated the sinful woman of Luke's story with Mary Magdalene thus kicking off an intentional campaign of discrediting the woman who was a towering leader of the early church and someone of enormous significance in the life and ministry of Jesus. it was simply unthinkable to give such importance to a woman! Talk about a

grievous error in need of forgiveness! But that's a conversation for another time. Today, I would just like to invite you to take note that no where in this story do Jesus or even Simon the Pharisee say what the woman's great sin was. Most scholars argue that it must have been prostitution or at least promiscuous behavior because Simon obviously knew she was a sinner, and assumed Jesus should know too. But we have to ask, why the leap to prostitution and promiscuity? Maybe she was just a woman who spoke her mind too often in public. Maybe she was a woman who chafed at the limits of her life that strict adherence to the laws of Temple Judaism would have imposed upon her.

What Jesus does say about this woman is to acknowledge fully her personhood and her gifts to him of welcome and love, things which Simon the Pharisee should have offered to Jesus and didn't: a kiss of welcome, cool water poured over his feet and anointing with soothing oil. Jesus seems to know that Simon is judging him harshly for accepting the woman's gifts with love so he tells a short parable. A creditor has two debtors who owe him money. One owes him a great deal and the other only a little. The creditor forgives them both completely. "Which of them will love him more?" Jesus asks Simon. "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt," Simon answers. "You have judged rightly," Jesus responds.

But Simon still doesn't get it. To him, this woman is a sinner. It's obvious! Her hair is unbound and loose. She dares to touch a man she doesn't know. Technically, it was okay that she came in to see Jesus because whenever a rabbi was known to be visiting someone's house, it was perfectly acceptable for anyone to come in to greet the rabbi. But, still, what kind of woman behaves like that, Simon would think. Jesus just doesn't get it. This is also why when at the end of the story Jesus says to the woman, "your sins are forgiven," Simon and all of his other guests at the dinner table no doubt went ballistic. It would seem that only Jesus and the woman knew what was really going on. Jesus saw her. Simon only saw what he thought he knew about her. Jesus saw her in all her full personhood. Simon only saw a prototype of a woman who must be sinful based on the way she behaved. Jesus forgave her sin. Simon only kept track, not really caring if his tallying of her sins was right or wrong. Only his perceptions of her mattered. This is the great sin of this story – Simon's lack of love, his inability to see past his own perceptions in the moment to understand what was really going on. Even though Simon gave Jesus the right answer to the question posed by the parable, he didn't comprehend what it meant in real life. The process of forgiveness was lost to him, both with regard to the woman and himself.

So, how is it that we can be sure to engage fully with this process of forgiveness that Jesus illustrates in this story? How is it that we can move beyond the narrow mindedness of Simon to the boundless mercy and love manifested by Jesus and the woman? First, we must recognize that the woman's ministrations to Jesus – her tears, wiping his skin with her hair, the sweet smelling ointment, all of which were applied to his feet – the dirtiest and lowliest part of his body such as a servant would do – these are actions grounded in profound love and deep gratitude for the mercy and forgiveness she knew she received from Jesus, no matter what her sin was. Thus, her actions were completely grounded in love. Jesus in turn responds in love, not pushing her away or chiding her once again for her sin as Simon thought he should. The interaction between this woman and Jesus is the embodiment of divine love, love which knows no boundaries, love which transcends all sin and sorrow. This woman's profound love defied social and religious convention bursting forth in a love she could not contain within herself.

Dear friends, this story tells us that forgiveness must always be grounded in love if it is to be genuine. Forgiveness can never be just a transaction. It is always a process of awareness of the wrong committed and the pain caused and how the parties involved must now live in a mutual reality forever altered by the wrong. This kind of forgiveness, the kind needed when the wrong

is great and the impact profound, can never be reduced to a single moment in time. This is not forgiveness that lives in the heart.

So, dear friends, I ask you to consider, is forgiveness the consequence of love, OR is love the consequence of forgiveness? Certainly, one is not possible without the other. Jesus is the embodiment of that reality. Is it true that great sin requiring great forgiveness can only grow from profound love, the kind of love only possible with God? Is it possible that such great forgiveness rooted in great love only becomes real as the years pass and a process beyond our ability to understand unfolds? Are we capable of this kind of love? Are we capable of forgiveness of this magnitude? Are we willing and able to engage in the process of love that real forgiveness requires? That, dear friends, is a very personal question which requires a very personal answer. As you consider how you will answer, might I suggest you consider the matter for which forgiveness is required to see if it is a problem elephant you have placed in a shipping container. If so, start pricing elephant feed. But, maybe, just maybe, it is a matter in which more love – for yourself and/or someone else – is needed. Probably not the easy answer, or the simple one, but definitely the Jesus one. Amen.