

Sermon Series: Why We Gather: Valuing Grace-Filled Accountability

Sermon Title: Forgiveness and Reset

Scripture Text: Luke 7:36-50 (NRSV)

August 28, 2017

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³⁶ When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹ "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Sermon:

I was home with the kids one morning a few weeks ago, when Edwin got up, excitedly from the table where he was working on a craft of some kind, and said, “The box man is here!” He rushed to the door and came back with a package from Amazon, asking “Daddy, can I open it?” Not remembering having placed an order, I too was curious, so I said, “sure, but be careful, daddy doesn’t know what’s in there.” Edwin opened the box to reveal a birthday present that had come for me from my mother and father-in-law. It was a box set of Johnny Cash’s American Recordings, 6 full length albums on 7 12” vinyls, all recorded in the last decade of his life.

The American Recordings were project he did with the famous producer Rick Rubin, wherein he covered a host of artists from Hank Williams to Paul Simon, from Neil Diamond to U2, from Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen to Chris Cornell and Trent Reznor. I’ve been wanting this box set for a decade, and to hear it on vinyl is other worldly. It’s like I was given a national treasure that needs to be heard and experienced, so if any of you want to come over and listen, consider this an invite! It’ll probably have to be after the kids go to bed, so, plan to be up late.

Now, why do I tell you this other than I’m just so excited about it? Well, I’ve long been drawn to the music of Johnny Cash, and I think these albums, (most of which are not even his songs, but rather, songs that captured his attention) I think they speak to what is so compelling and I would even go so far to say prophetic in his music; and that is, his full acknowledgement and even embrace of darkness, loss, and failure that characterized much of his life.

If you know Cash’s story, it’s a story of tremendous success and tremendous failure, of love and loss, reckless ambition and ravenous addiction, of recovery and relapse. It’s a story of incredible paradox and yet also completeness, like his life and music speak to the human experience in full circle. Interestingly, Cash actually began his music career as a gospel musician, which never produced a recording contract. In fact, it wasn’t until 1955 when he auditioned at Sun Records that his career took off, when producer Sam Phillips told Cash that he wasn’t interested in his gospel music, and basically told him to, “Go home and sin a little bit, and then come back and sing me something I can sell.” The moment is brilliantly captured in the movie “Walk the Line” where Johnny is played by Joaquin Phoenix. I want to show you the clip, so settle in, because it’s a little over 4 minutes long, but worth the time!

Video: *Walk the Line* - audition scene¹ (cut at 4:13)

Jesus tells Simon the pharisee that “whoever has been forgiven little loves little” and that the woman’s sins, which were many, “have been forgiven—as her great love has shown.”

Johnny Cash’s life and music evoke many of the same spiritual insights that are expressed in this gospel story; that the pathway to *union* with God is not through “righteousness” in the sense of striving or moralism or perfection, but rather through failure, sin, and loss. Over the the 6 albums in the American Recordings series, you see Cash move from songs of tremendous loss and regret that are deeply confessional, to songs of great joy and anticipation. It’s as if the records follow a redemptive arc from hopelessness into death, and then into new birth where deep gratitude, radical grace and love abound.

And the message that you’re left with listening to these albums is anything but a hero’s journey. In fact, they rather point to the haunting reality that great love is not often the result of personal greatness, but rather, the result of an awakened sense of our own vulnerability and need, often forged in darkness, and yet transformed and redeemed by the great forgiveness and grace of a God who relentlessly invites us to lose ourselves and our lives that we might find true life and our truest selves in loving union with God and one another.

I’ve spent most of my life in the church, wrestling with the difficult realities of sin and shame, forgiveness and grace, in my own life and the lives of others. And after almost 25 years of vocational ministry, I am convinced that we church people often spend our days chasing after the wrong thing. We learn early about the love and grace and forgiveness of God, but we tend to quickly seek to ensure lives that do not need forgiveness, that are deserving of God’s love and approval, that secure us from any sense of vulnerability that might need to call upon grace. We chase perfection or at least a life of “better than most” in order to protect ourselves from the difficulty of our own darkness, failure, and imperfection.

In one of his daily meditations, Richard Rohr recently said that “union is a very different goal than private perfection.”² In this Gospel story, Jesus draws the inextricable link between forgiveness and love, but we tend to get it backwards. It is NOT that the one who forgives much is loved much, but rather, the one who is forgiven much loves

¹Watch entire clip at <https://dotsub.com/view/a2ae616d-0ad1-404f-85a0-21c827a468f8>

² <https://cac.org/mixed-blessings-2017-08-22/>

much. The fruit of forgiveness is love, it is union. The fruit of personal perfectionism is distance, separateness, and control. And as Rohr among others in the mystical tradition would argue, it is not our shadow self that is the problem, it is our separate self. Meaning, it is not that which is broken or weak or what we often think of as “sinful” in us that is problematic, rather, it is that which divides and separates us. It’s that which causes us to hide and deny our brokenness, vulnerability, and imperfection that keeps us from entering into loving union with God and interdependence and deep solidarity with one another. That, the divided self, is what the Gospels seem to continually point to as “sin”, and what Jesus condemns voraciously in the New Testament.

It’s not surprising that the guests seated around the table that night began to question, “Who is this that even forgives sin?” Their lives had been all about avoiding the need for forgiveness! Of course it seemed impossible to them to actually grant forgiveness to another. You cannot give what you cannot receive.

But why, in a sermon on Forgiveness and Reset, do we begin here? Why do we need to begin on the receiving end of forgiveness? Isn’t this series supposed to be wrestling with the notion of “Valuing Grace-filled Accountability”? I mean, where’s the accountability in grace and forgiveness? Are we supposed to just give people a free pass to do whatever they want, because, according to your logic Todd, the more you need to be forgiven the more you’ll be able to love? That sounds great for the offender, but what about the offended, what about the victim? How is your Johnny Cash lovin’, failure flauntin’, *Folsom Prison* theology any kind of good news to those who suffer the consequences of other people’s sin? How does forgiveness function much less bring about any kind of accountability in the wake of Charlottesville? Are we really supposed to embrace the darkness when the darkness is capable of such hatred and violence?

Hmmm, that’s a good point. Well, I guess it’s a mystery. Let’s pray!

I’m kidding, of course. The truth is that there is not a theology anywhere that somehow takes away the very real pain and consequence of human sin such as hatred and violence. Any theology that even attempts to do so, or even seeks to diminish it is not worth its salt. No, people sometimes do terrible things, I have done terrible things, both conscious and unconscious, things which have caused great pain to those I love and to those I’ve never met. I’m not saying that we should just close our eyes and pretend that is not the case, or excuse it as merely a part of our human predicament.

What I am saying is that for whatever reason, the pathway to transformation and healing, the very pattern of redemption seems less to be about white knuckling our way to perfection, and more about dying and being born again both of which are, quite literally, a bloody mess.

14th century Christian mystic Julian of Norwich has been quoted as saying; “First there is the fall, and then there is recovery from the fall. And both are the mercy of God.”³ If this is true, then perhaps in order for us to become a people who, like Christ, offer genuine forgiveness to those who have wronged us, we must first experience both sides of God’s mercy, that apart from both our own fall and recovery from the fall, we cannot really know mercy much less offer it to one another.

And isn’t that the point of forgiveness? Isn’t forgiveness ultimately about mercy, about offering a path toward wholeness for both the offended and the offender? Notice I say a path toward wholeness, and not necessarily reconciliation. There’s more to say about that, but for now, let me just say that reconciliation is complicated, and while reconciled relationships can sometimes result from forgiveness, it is not necessarily the goal of forgiveness, which is why I like the idea of a path toward wholeness for both the victim and the perpetrator.

Yale professor and theologian Miroslav Volf has spent his career studying the topics of identity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Croatian born, Volf was raised protestant in a time of marxist hostility toward religion in then communist Yugoslavia, and later amidst nationalist and religious conflict that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf wrestles with the question, “How does one remain loyal both to the demand of the oppressed for justice and to the gift of forgiveness that the Crucified one offered to the perpetrators?”⁴

In the book, he argues that forgiveness like that which Christ models on the cross can be possible even between enemies here on earth without giving up one’s selfhood or sacrificing justice. He proposes that we can move beyond exclusion as a way to deal with that which is problematic in the other, and instead practice embrace, which is ultimately rooted in God’s trinitarian nature, where self-giving love and embrace constitute union both within the divine, and function as an invitation to humanity to participate in such union in God and with one another.

³ Quoted in Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Cleveland: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 2008).

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 9.

Now, I want to clarify what Volf means when he speaks of embrace, and particularly about the act of forgiveness. He says that forgiveness involves two important actions; first, “to forgive is to name the offense.”⁵ And in that sense, forgiveness is not merely a free pass, it does not erase the offense or abandon justice. Rather it names the offense and therefore, holds the offender to account. But forgiveness does not end there. The second important action in forgiveness, Volf proposes, is to “give the wrongdoer the gift of not holding the wrongdoing against them.”⁶

Now, this does not mean that either the victim or the perpetrator are somehow magically released from suffering the consequence of the offense. He even suggests that restitution or further consequence for the perpetrator may be appropriate, as well as meaningful boundaries for the victim to avoid further harm. And yet, the idea here is that once the offense is named, true forgiveness requires some kind of release from holding the offense against the perpetrator, freeing both the perpetrator and the victim to recover their humanity.

Volf’s understanding of forgiveness is deeply entwined in a sense of shared humanity and common brokenness or “sin”. A denial of either is what I think Rohr and others would refer to as the “divided self”. And yet, forgiveness remains and incredibly difficult and rare occurrence in many of our lives. Listen to how Volf speaks of why forgiveness is so uncommon;

"Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion - without transposing the enemy from the sphere of monstrous inhumanity into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to rediscover that person's humanity and imitate God's love for him. And when one knows that God's love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself in the light of God's justice and so rediscover one's own sinfulness."⁷

⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p.129.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p.124.

This is what it means to embrace! To overcome the double exclusion, and to find freedom to see both oneself and the “other” as ones in need of and bound by the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God. But this can all get quite theoretical unless we can actually envision ourselves as the offender or the offended. And, I’d venture to guess that within our own conflicts, we rather tend to see ourselves as the offended. Regardless, it is helpful to reflect on how the double exclusion tends to function within you, and what forgiveness might therefore require.

So, I want to invite you to consider a situation in which you feel that you have been wronged or made victim. Go ahead and picture the person who has offended you. Close your eyes if it helps. How do you see them? In what ways might you, as Volf describes, exclude them from the community of humans? How do you exclude yourself from the community of sinners in regard to the conflict or offense at hand? How’s that working for you?

Now, I do not mean to insinuate that there are not true victims and perpetrators in many cases, or that the victim is somehow partially responsible for the crime that has violated them. It is crucial that we do not further victimize those who have been victims of things like domestic abuse or sexual violence. Again, forgiveness means naming and condemning the offense, which assumes that there is an offender. But the gift of forgiveness is that we can condemn the offense while simultaneously affirming the humanity of the offender, an act that the great rabbi Harold Kushner would say actually liberates the one doing the forgiving, regardless of whether it is received or transformative for the one who is forgiven.⁸ And yet, the possibility of mutual liberation, of transformation for both the perpetrator and the victim, well, that seems to be the hope of forgiveness and the scandal of the cross.

This week in our worship planning time, Heather Albinson turned me toward a podcast that I’ve heard before, called Snap Judgement, but I’d not heard this particular episode. The story is of a Rabbi who moved from New York City to Lincoln, Nebraska. As soon as he and his family moved into the community, he began receiving threatening, anti-semitic phone calls and even nazi paraphernalia in the mail. After notifying the police several times, the police told him that they thought they might know who the threats were coming from, a guy by the name of Larry Trapp, a prominent member of the KKK.

⁸ See Kushner’s chapter on forgiveness in *Nine Essential Things I’ve Learned About Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

But, instead of trying to get Larry to leave him alone, Rabbi Weisser (pronounced wi~~z~~er) began calling Larry every Thursday at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, leaving messages on his answering machine that he called "love notes", such as "There's a lot of love in the world Larry, and you're not getting any of it!" Let's listen to the rest of the story in the Rabbi's own words...

Audio: Snap Judgement - The Rabbi and the KKK⁹ (start at 4:32, finish at 10:19).

What a beautiful story of mutual liberation! Can you imagine that kind of liberation in our own lives, in our own community, in our nation and world? I have to confess, that even as I prepared for this message, I have those in my life that I struggle to see as human, people both on the news, and those whose homes I've shared a meal in, who I have made into a monster in my head and heart because of how I perceive them to have wronged me. I'm not going to air that all out here, but the story of Larry and the Rabbi usher me an invitation to do the difficult inner work to see differently, to face my own brokenness and walk a path toward wholeness. The truth is that I've likely been the perpetrator more than the victim anyways, and so maybe a good place to start is with me.

What about you? What is the invitation for you? Do you, like the pharisee in the story find yourself so consumed with judgement that you find it difficult to find mercy because you've worked so hard not to need it? Or are you like a young Johnny Cash, filled with hurt and not sure how to express it to God much less anyone else? Or are you harboring anger and pain toward someone who's done you wrong such that you're the one in prison, needing to find release? Maybe you've wronged someone you love, and you cannot imagine how they might find grace yet again. Whatever you're holding, follow the invitation! It may be a long slow journey, but there's liberation on the other side of forgiveness!

Closing Song: Forgive

Benediction: As we go today, may we be a people who move through the pain of our brokenness to such radical embrace that not only are we transformed and liberated, but we become liberators of our broken world. Amen.

⁹ Listen to the full story at <http://snapjudgment.org/rabbi-and-kkk>