

Lent is a time of Reconciliation

Jesus said, "A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."' So he got up and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began.

Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'" Luke 15:11-32

This parable—perhaps the most beautiful and most important in the Gospels—begs the question: Which son am I? Am I the younger son who has sinned and is in need of forgiveness and reconciliation or am I the older son who refuses to forgive? Every time we say the words of the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," we are we are promising to be both a redeemed younger son and a redeemed older son.

To be a redeemed younger son would mean that I finally admit my own spiritual bankruptcy and inability to save myself from the self-dug pit that I have fallen in. Right this minute, in the middle of Lent, 2021, am I the younger son? Do I need to "return home" and say, "Father, I have sinned...." One way in which I might be the younger son is if I owe someone an apology and have been too proud to confess and beg forgiveness. Perhaps years ago, I wounded someone badly and I have never had the courage and humility to walk that long walk home. Might now be a moment to do so? Perhaps, I've wronged someone not in some dramatic way but through a thousand little ways over time—death by a thousand cuts. Might now be the moment to "return home" and say to that person, "I have sinned....Please forgive me."

Another way in which I might be the younger son is that I have not reconciled with God. Perhaps it's been a while since I've been to Confession. Perhaps there is a sin that I am so ashamed of that it has kept me from "returning to the Father." Might now be the moment?

Or might you relate more to the elder son? Might you be consumed by your hurt and righteous anger and have refused to "enter into the party?" What will it take for you to finally forgive that person who has hurt you so deeply?

These are two things that forgiveness is NOT. First, forgiveness is not saying that I am no longer hurt. I am largely unable to heal myself of the hurt I feel and forgiving the offender will not instantly remove the pain. Second, forgiveness does not necessarily mean that I trust the person again. Years ago, in a contentious faculty meeting, our most loved and respected teacher said to us all. "I love every one of you all. Some of you I don't trust as far as I can throw you, but I do love you." And we all knew that she meant it. I learned a valuable lesson that day. I learned that I can forgive and love again, even if I can't trust the person again.

These are two things that forgiveness IS. First, forgiveness is saying "I release you from the debtor's prison of my heart." A person who could not repay their loans were put in debtor's prison until they could repay. But how on earth could a person earn money in a prison? They were doomed. When I am hurt, I place that person in a debtor's prison in my heart. The problem is that I too am now doomed to be the prison guard making sure that they never escape. Both of us are imprisoned, regardless of which side of the bars we stand on. To forgive is to say, "I release you." Second, forgiveness is saying, "You are back in the family now." The Prodigal Father said, "Quickly, put a ring on his finger." Why? Because the ring would tell everyone he encounters that he is once again a member of the tribe and would have the tribe's love and protection. Though I may not be able to trust again, I can—with God's grace—welcome the Prodigal Son back into my family. Lent is the moment to do so.

