

You Are Forgiven
Luke 15:11-24
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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What is forgiveness? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?

And it's not the only question we have about forgiveness. There are companion questions that come along with it because we don't only find ourselves wondering what forgiveness is, but we also ask:

- How do we forgive? (And that is lifelong learning)
- Do we have to forgive? (Jesus certainly finds it important)
- Does forgiving mean forgetting? (And by the way the answer is no)
- Does forgiving mean we have to reconcile and continue in relationship with the one we have forgiven? (Again, the answer is no)
- Who does forgiveness benefit? (Well, if you've forgiven someone, you know it doesn't only benefit the one who did wrong)
- And again...but how do we forgive?

There are so many conversations to be had around the topic of forgiveness. And the answers are far more complex than my quick responses.

But have you ever noticed that most of our conversations are centered on the hurts that other people commit against us? They are centered on our need, or our desire, or our refusal to forgive someone else. Most of our conversations center on the sins of others and *their* need for forgiveness. Most of our conversations mean our questions are about offering forgiveness, not receiving it.

Perhaps that's just because we are far superior humans who have never hurt another, who have never done anything wrong. Could that be? Well, you are spectacular, but I suspect that none of us is above needing to be forgiven.

And really, we know that, don't we? Yet, still, it is a difficult conversation to have. It is a difficult reality to face.

Perhaps our conversations tend to point toward others because other people's sins are always more fun to talk about than our own.

Perhaps our conversations tend to point toward others because we feel the weight of the ways we have hurt people and we don't know how to talk honestly and openly about that reality.

Perhaps our conversations tend to point toward others because the guilt and the shame we experience is pretty overwhelming.

Perhaps it isn't that we aren't willing to acknowledge the ways that we need forgiveness...many of us are perfectly capable of articulating our own faults deep in our hearts and minds.

Perhaps we are simply scared of what it means to acknowledge our sin. Scared of the judgment of others. Scared that the worst of who we are will become all that people see. Scared that we aren't worthy of forgiveness.

There was a young man whose heart longed for adventure. His family was a little too traditional for him. The expectation was that he and his brother would stay close by, would work in the family business, would continue to do what his father had done and what his father's father had done.

But this young man wanted more.

He knew there was a world of adventure and excitement waiting for him. He knew that there were so many other things to see and to do.

So, he went to his father. He worked up his confidence, after all, this was no small ask, and entered his father's office. "Dad, I've been thinking...it's not that what you do is unimportant, but I don't think it's for me. I want to see the world. I want to know what's out there. I feel this pull to go find adventure and romance and perhaps a different career. So, I have an idea."

Can't you feel the weight of the tension in the room? Can't you imagine the pause as the young man gulped and prepared to make a proposal to his dad?

"Here's what I am thinking, Dad. I know you pride yourself on being able to leave an inheritance for my brother and I when you die. But, is there any way you could share mine with me now? After all, wouldn't you like to see what I do with it? Wouldn't you like to celebrate my success with me?"

Then he waited. His father's response came in only a few seconds, but it felt like hours to that young man. Hours before he heard his father say, "We could probably work something out."

The young man could hardly believe his ears. His dad was going to let him do what he wanted. He was going to go out into the world and discover all the wonderful things that awaited him.

He quickly made a plan and when he was ready, he packed his bags, hugged his family, and set off.

And he had fun...for a while. But sooner than he anticipated he began to realize that his resources didn't actually go very far, and life away from everyone and everything he knew was more challenging than he expected. He began to evaluate his choices and realize he had made several that he regretted.

But what could he do? He got a job, it was grunt work, nothing to write home about. But he needed to eat. He worked hard, after all he couldn't afford to lose this job. And he found himself daydreaming about being back home.

But there was no way to go back. He had painted a picture for his family about his future success. He had convinced himself and others that this was the best thing for him. Meanwhile he had failed and wasted away his parents' money doing it. He couldn't go home.

Yet the day came when he decided there was no other choice. He would be honest. He would confess all that he had done wrong. He wouldn't ask for another inheritance or even to live at home with his family. He wouldn't even ask to be treated as family. He would only ask for a job, because his father's business paid better than anything he had found out here.

He mustered up his courage and set out for home. The closer he got the more energy he put into practicing his speech. He knew what he was going to say and simply hoped that his father would listen. His heart rate increased as he came to his hometown. It increased a little more as he entered his neighborhood. Each step took him closer to home and each step seemed harder.

He was a couple blocks away, but could see the corner of the yard he grew up playing in. He wasn't sure he could even make it the rest of the way.

But then, down the street he saw someone coming toward him. It was his father, having recognized him from a distance, hurrying his direction, arms open wide, delighted to see his son.

The speech the young man had prepared. It went out the window. He would talk to his dad later. He would be honest about everything that had happened. He would confess his own sins. But, today, his dad was throwing a party and forgiveness was coming down like confetti.

Friends, we do know our own sins. We know our faults and our failings. Even if we resist saying them aloud or struggle to confess them to other humans, we know deep down inside, all too well, the ways that we have hurt others, that we have hurt creation, that we have hurt God.

The invitation is for us to experience the forgiveness of God in the face of our sin. For the same God who says "You are loved," the same God who named us as good, that same God has a heart ready to forgive. There is nothing you can do that puts you outside of the reach of God's forgiveness. There is nothing you can do from which God will not welcome you home.

Friends, you are forgiven.