

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Way of the Cross,
A Lenten Series on Forgiveness:
Self-Examination”**

**Luke 15:11-24
Luke 15:25-32**

**Second Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2017**

Luke 15:11-24

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:25-32

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

“The Way of the Cross, A Lenten Series on Forgiveness: Self-Examination”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Celebrating Lent in the church is relatively new to me. When growing up in the Pentecostal church, I never even knew what Lent was. I had heard of it, and definitely by high school I knew it as a time that Catholics gave things up, like candy. In fact, one of my high school friends, who found church increasingly isolating, told me once that she was giving up Christianity for Lent. So, this season was just a weird thing for me. Even after I became a Presbyterian, it was never really something that factored into my Christian life. So, this season I decided that we should all journey together on a topic that I think all of us can reflect on. Traditionally, Lent is a season for penitence, that means a time when we seek out repentance and refocus our lives to center around Christ. This is a season of divine forgiveness, with the cross at the climax of it all. In my own

personal life, I know I need more forgiveness, to offer it more and to be willing to accept it more. So, we are going to do a five-week series on forgiveness that I am calling “The Way of the Cross.” I draw heavily from the book *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study* by Marjorie J. Thompson, so if you like some of the things you hear or are interested in the Bible Study aspect, I encourage you to look into her book.

For this inaugural Sunday, we are looking at one of the most famous stories about forgiveness that Jesus ever told. We all know the story of the Prodigal Son, and if you didn’t, you heard it here this morning. I don’t want to bore you with a re-telling of the story, so I’m going to just jump right into some critical thinking. Look with me at verse fifteen of the story. The younger son has spent his inheritance—he has gambled it and prostituted it away—and he now finds himself eating out of the slop troughs of the pigs. We need to look at this a little closer. Luke is telling us a lot, we just need to hear this with the ears of Jesus’ audience. Jesus isn’t simply saying the guy is just homeless, while that’s certainly a bad situation, it’s a whole lot worse because not only is this guy homeless, he’s eating with pigs. You know the Jews don’t eat pork. The pig is ceremonially unclean. This younger son has gotten himself in such a gutter that he is eating with the dirtiest of dirty animals. According to Jewish law, this boy is no longer fit to be one of the Israelites. He has defiled himself beyond recognition, and in his mind, beyond redemption. Which is why in verse eighteen he says, “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’” It took him a long time, and he had to be in the lowest of low, in order to realize the situation. This is the point when he finally came to his senses. Here is where he was able to examine himself and his situation, and realize that something needed to change. He knew that he could no longer be called his father’s son, so instead, he *hoped* that *maybe* his father will hire him as a servant.

Now, let’s fast-forward in the story to verse twenty-five. Luke tells us that the elder brother was out in the field working when word comes to him that his young brother has returned. Let’s put ourselves in the elder brother’s shoes for a moment. Doubtless he heard all about his younger brother’s exploits. You know how rumors and gossip spread like wildfire, even across borders. I’m sure every week, when the elder brother was out in the field working with the other hired hands, he heard the stories of his young brother. “Did you hear what that boy did the other day? He bought himself a new convertible and crashed it within the hour.” “I heard he went to the bar the other night and bought everyone drinks. He was so plastered that he even tripped right in front of a sheriff.” “Well I heard he spent the last of his inheritance on a carton of cigarettes and is now sitting under the bridge chain smoking.” Every day the elder brother heard the stories, and every day he grew to hate his younger brother, and all the tarnish he’d brought on the family name. I think we can sympathize with the elder brother. He never disobeyed his father. He worked diligently. He was prudent with his finances. He feels shafted yet again. The parable never tells us what happens, but I imagine it took a very long time, if ever, for the older brother to forgive his brother and his father.

The beauty of this story is in all the different characters and their different viewpoints and actions. For this morning, we’ll focus just on the brothers. Thompson says, “It takes a certain level of awareness to name what we are thinking or feeling at any given time...What we cannot

acknowledge we cannot confess, and what we cannot confess we cannot present for forgiveness and healing.”¹ Here we have two different actions from the two brothers. The younger finally comes to terms with his situation and his bad decisions. This self-examination came at the lowest point of his adventure. It took a lot of changes for him to realize how far he had gone down the literal gutter. When he does come to himself, he doesn’t wallow in self-pity. He doesn’t cry out “Woe is me and my situation, I’m just going to die here, I have nothing left to offer.” No, God places within him the realization that he has wronged his father and must seek reconciliation. He knows that his father has the right to refuse to call him son, but his self-examination brings him to realize that he nevertheless needs to seek forgiveness. Now, in this same story, we have an example of the exact opposite reaction. I fully believe the younger brother was not the only one who needed to seek forgiveness. The elder brother, too, is holding a grudge against his brother and father. Verse twenty-eight says “He became angry and refused to go in [the house to celebrate his brother’s return].” He’s angry, and rightfully so. But unlike his younger brother, he doesn’t take the time for self-examination. He doesn’t listen to God’s tugging at his heart to seek forgiveness. Regarding the older brother, Jesus leaves the parable in a cliffhanger. The older brother hadn’t yet acknowledged his feeling hurt by his brother and betrayed by his father. He is unaware that he, too, needs reconciliation, and there the story ends, leaving us wondering.

“Awareness, acknowledgement, and confession are the foundation for seeking and receiving forgiveness.”² We cannot even begin the road to forgiveness without first realizing that we need it. Otherwise, we end up like the older brother. The offense may be real and our anger justified, but I believe Christians have a higher calling when it comes to conflict. I hope we’ll all learn this lesson over this Lenten season. Our fallenness mandates that we seek forgiveness, especially from God and definitely from others. Since this is my first Sunday, y’all know very little about my theology. Well, it depends heavily on the idea that Christians are bi-relational. That means we have a vertical relationship with God and a horizontal relationship with people. As I’m sure you well know, sometimes relationships hit rocky points and we need to seek or offer forgiveness. Regarding our relationship with God, Thompson says, “Sin is a deeply rooted disorientation in which we tend to see all things primarily in relation to ourselves rather than in relation to God.”³ It is sin that always causes bumps in our relationship with God. It is sin that turns our focus away from God. Our depravity, as Calvin likes to call it, is always wanting to lead us further and further away from God. Using another metaphor, God is like the parent we are running towards to embrace, but sin clouds our minds and causes us to lose our focus, turning us, instead, to look away at brilliant, earthly objects on the sides of the road. The human race has spiritual A.D.D., if you will, and we are constantly being distracted by the shiny things of the devil.

To explore this, Thompson uses the story of King David and his impropriety with Bathsheba. “First, he indulged in adultery with Bathsheba while her husband, Uriah, was off fighting the king’s battles. Then, in an attempt to disguise Bathsheba’s resulting pregnancy, David tried twice to manipulate Uriah into breaking military conduct in order to sleep with his wife. When these

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, page 13.

² Page 13.

³ Page 14.

efforts to cover his tracks failed, David resorted to a successful plot with his army commander to get Uriah killed in battle.”⁴ Later on, God sends to David the prophet Nathan, who shares the story of how a wealthy man took a poor man’s only lamb, and slaughtered it to feed a traveler because this rich man was loath to take one of his own flock. In response to the rich man’s treachery, King David cries out, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”⁵ Nathan reveals to the King that he is the rich man who took what was not his and had no pity. Now, tradition says that the Fifty-First Psalm is David’s prayer to God after Nathan came to him. Listen to these words of King David’s self-examination:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment...Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit...O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise...

When we examine ourselves, and I mean when we truly take a look at our situation, we see just how broken we are. But we can’t just look at our situation and do nothing. Upon self-reflection, we should be like the prodigal son and come to terms with our fallenness. Not only must we come to terms with ourselves, but we must remember that we cannot hide anything from God. Even the chosen and powerful King David couldn’t hide his indiscretion from God, no matter how hard he tried. And upon seeing the depravity of his actions, turned to God, and cried out to Him, “Create in me a clean heart.”. Not only are we examining ourselves, but God, too, is examining us, both inside and out. Augustus Toplady penned the hymn *Rock of Ages*, which we’ll sing after this sermon. Tradition has it that Toplady wrote this hymn when he was caught in a threatening storm and found refuge in a gap in a stone gorge. Presented with imminent death, and in a moment of self-examination, Toplady cries out to God, seeking forgiveness, and is inspired to write those words. We are naked before God, who sees us entirely for who we are, and yet—this, my friends, is the Good News—and yet, God continues to extend to us grace. King David, upon Nathan’s prophecy, knew that he would receive condemnation from God, he knew that he deserved whatever punishment God dished out. But when he cried out and named his sin, Nathan told David that God would not kill him. God’s forgiveness of our sins is completely undeserved. I’m not the biggest fan of hellfire and brimstone preaching, but I do think we need to be reminded every now and then that hell is where we deserve to be. If God told

⁴ Pages 15-16.

⁵ II Samuel 12:5-6

us one day that for the next twenty-four hours we could do anything we want and there would be no consequences, how many people would explore something insidious or nefarious? We don't deserve heaven, but God, out of his great and steadfast love for his creation, has deemed us fit for forgiveness and has called us to live in eternal life with him. This is the question I want to leave with you. If God, who doesn't really need to forgive us, is still willing to extend us grace, how much more are we called to respond to our neighbors with that selfsame grace? "Learning forgiveness requires first that we clearly see our own need for it."⁶ Not only do we need forgiveness, God extends it to us from upon the cross; and that my sisters and brothers, should inspire us to walk the way of the cross, examining ourselves at every step.

Let us pray. "Great God, you are rich in mercy beyond our knowing. We thank you for the gift of your forgiveness of our sin, made known to us in Jesus. Help us to open our minds and hearts to your Holy Spirit in the days ahead as we travel together through this Lenten season. Show us what we need to understand, and help us learn how to practice forgiveness in all our relationships so that we might experience the renewal of common life you desire and offer to us in Christ our Lord...We acknowledge that often we take our deepest relationships for granted and find ourselves at odds with each other by putting our own interests first...By your generous mercy, give us humility and courage to both receive and to offer forgiveness so that our life together may be restored in the unity of love."⁷ In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

⁶ Thompson, 22.

⁷ Page 71.