

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

**“The Way of the Cross,
A Lenten Series on Forgiveness:
Reconciliation”**

**Psalm 32:6-11
Luke 7:36-47**

**Sixth Sunday in Lent
April 9, 2017**

Psalm 32:6-11

Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. *Selah*

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you. Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

Luke 7:36-47

One of the Pharisees asked [him] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."

"The Way of the Cross, A Lenten Series on Forgiveness: Reconciliation"

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.

This week we shall close our Lenten sermon series on forgiveness with the end goal of reconciliation. Reconciliation is what we hope to have between ourselves and God, and what we hope to have with our neighbors. We've been using Marjorie J. Thompson's book *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study* as our guide; and she outlines five steps of forgiveness. The first we learned is self-examination. This is when we reach a level of maturity that allows the Holy Spirit to reveal to us our need to seek forgiveness, both from God and from our neighbors. This step is intimately connected to the next, which is honesty. Being honest with ourselves means that we come to terms with the wrongs we have committed and genuinely feel sorry for them. This leads us to the third step. Feeling sorry and saying we're sorry is the very definition of repentance. The

honest self-examination discloses to us that there is an imbalance to a relationship and so we seek to bring back a harmony. The fourth step equalizes this equation by presenting the actual forgiving. This is where the other party receives the contrition and repentance of their offender. As we learned last week, this can be hard because sometimes our egos want to hold on to emotions of entitlement. Other times it might not be the healthiest option to rush into forgiveness and more time is needed for healing. Nevertheless, the Christian should always make her way towards forgiveness; then the final step of reconciling the two parties can occur. With that said, I want to start with a story, which Thompson shares, about two men, Gary and Wayne.

“During a motel robbery, a young man named Wayne shot [at point-blank range] Gary, the fellow working behind the front desk...Gary survived but suffered from physical and psychological scars for many years. He finally decided the only way to find healing from recurrent nightmares and post-traumatic stress was to confront his attacker. He contacted a mediation program that arranged for a face-to-face meeting between the two men at the prison where Wayne was held.

“Once the men were seated across a table from each other, a mediator placed them on equal footing rather than reinforcing roles such as ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator.’ He began by asking both men to look at each other and to talk to each other as ‘human beings, man to man.’ Empowered with trust in their basic humanity, the two men proceeded. Gary politely, but with a shaky voice, asked Wayne to explain why the robbery had gotten so violent. He also described how his life had never been the same and how his family and work had been affected by the trauma of being shot. Wayne, faced directly with the human impact of his actions, said repeatedly how sorry he was for what he had done and how it had affected Gary and his family. Each man was able to recognize and acknowledge that the other had lost much in the aftermath of this violence. Both were empowered with new understanding of the other and of themselves. Gary received Wayne’s apology and thanked him for it, which helped Wayne feel accepted, inwardly freed, and taken seriously as a person. The exchange was transformative. Gary came to Wayne’s parole hearing and asked for his release. Since then, they have appeared many times throughout New York State to speak of their experience.”¹

Thompson asks us to look at the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. “Is it possible to be reconciled to someone without forgiveness? Does forgiveness lead naturally to reconciliation? Are we still obliged by Christian principle to forgive if no reconciliation seems possible?”² In this story of Gary and Wayne, neither men explicitly used the language of forgiveness. Neither of the men said to the other, “I forgive you.” Nevertheless, forgiveness was present through and through. It was present in the way Gary received Wayne’s contrition for causing so much physical and emotional pain in Gary’s life. It was present in the way Wayne received a bit of his humanity back by Gary’s recognition and acknowledgment that both men had lost so much because of this tragedy. If this isn’t reconciliation, I don’t know what is. Thompson draws our attention to the balanced reversal of power and shame. “From attacker having power and victim having shame, to attacker having shame and victim having power.”³

¹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Forgiveness, A Lenten Study*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014. Pages 53-54.

² Thompson, 56.

³ Thompson, 57.

Where there is a wrong in a relationship, there is disharmony. Reconciliation is bringing back into harmony that disrupted relationship. That relationship might be strangers, two men on relatively equal footing. In this example the relationship was disrupted when one man, Wayne, decided to take power and commit a robbery, thus throwing the relationship askew by putting Gary beneath him. There are also balanced relationships with the people we know. Parents and children, employers and employees, teachers and students, etc. When these known relationships are disrupted by a traumatic reversal of power, it is only reconciliation that can bring the scales back to level. To answer the earlier question of whether reconciliation can exist with or without forgiveness, Thompson states “that a basic level of forgiveness is implied wherever genuine reconciliation occurs.”⁴

I agree with her on that assessment. Genuine reconciliation includes within it true forgiveness. When, however, reconciliation is not genuinely received, then we can assume that forgiveness was not implied. Last week I shared how sometimes we may not want to forgive because we might be selfishly motivated to keep our “victimhood” or we are deeply wounded that forgiveness might not be the healthiest choice and a period of prolonged grief is necessary. Well, likewise, reconciliation may be stalled for a variety of reasons. Sometimes we are just inwardly resistant to anything that would bring change or new life.⁵ Maybe as the offended party we like to see the offender suffer in his or her contrition. Maybe we like the imbalance and don’t want to bring equilibrium to the relationship. Maybe genuine reconciliation is too hard to muster, even if you do accept someone’s apology. “Reconciliation is the larger goal,” says Thompson, “reflecting the divine aim of our relationships with others and with God, but,” she adds, “it is not always possible, for us to achieve reconciliation with others in this life.”⁶ Say, for instance, the offender is dead or otherwise unable to communicate. What if the offender is completely dismissive of any wrongdoing? We yearn for repentance, and when we can’t find it or don’t have it, we have to learn to move on with the forgiveness process on our own.

This can be difficult sometimes because we deeply desire to have repentance as a “prerequisite to forgiveness.” It “satisfies our innate sense of justice,” asserts Thompson. “If as Christians we cannot retaliate or satisfy our thirst for vengeance, at least we can require repentance.”⁷ This idea of justice is something we cherish. I certainly do. If there is a wrong out there, then a correction of that wrong should be the goal, or at the very least sincerely sought after. “Repentance and restitution show that we are holding one another accountable for our actions and that there are tangible and painful consequences for breaking the laws that govern our life together.”⁸ But Jesus shakes this up a bit, doesn’t he? Many of Jesus’ healing and forgiving episodes are done almost spontaneously. There are a few times when Jesus asks for repentance from a sinner, but most often he simply hands out forgiveness of sins like a politician hands out pamphlets. We read one of those instances this morning.

⁴ Thompson, 58.

⁵ Thompson, 58.

⁶ Thompson, 58.

⁷ Thompson, 60.

⁸ Thompson, 60.

In our passage from Luke, our Lord finds himself at the house of one of the Pharisees, who has invited Jesus over for a meal. Upon finding his place at the table, Jesus is approached by a woman. Luke tells us that this woman is a sinner, which we can understand to mean she is most likely a prostitute. She washes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them off with her hair, anoints them with oil, and ceaselessly kisses them. Simon is aghast by what he sees, and wonders to himself whether or not Jesus knows about this woman's impropriety. And in classic Jesus fashion, our Lord tells Simon a parable that sounds very similar to the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. In this case, however, both servants are forgiven of their debts, and Jesus asks Simon which of the two loves the creditor more. Of course the Pharisee is oblivious to see what he is walking into and tells Jesus that the debtor with the biggest debt loves the generous creditor most of all. "Jesus then asks Simon to look at this woman...He points out that she has been engaged in acts of hospitality and signs of repentance since she entered. The key to the story lies in this statement [from verse forty-seven]: 'Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much.'"⁹ If we follow the logic of the parable, the debtor with the greater sum loves the creditor more because he has received forgiveness. Therefore, the sinful woman loves Jesus more because she knows she has received forgiveness. Repentance is implied in this story for a certainty. But Jesus never demands it of her. He never tells her, "repent or you shall never see forgiveness." I imagine that is what Simon the Pharisee would've asked of her. How often do we ask repentance from others? Demanding their apology while holding our forgiveness as a ransom.

Thompson presents to us an interesting observation. It isn't that if we don't repent, God will refuse to extend to us forgiveness; "it is, rather, that as we absorb the magnitude of God's undeserved gift of forgiveness, we can respond only with heartfelt repentance and gratitude."¹⁰ God loves us so much that He daily extends to us His gift of forgiveness, which, in all truth, we do not deserve. The woman in the parable is forgiven without even asking Jesus directly for it. In the original Greek, Christ says of her, "Her sins, which are many, *are being forgiven*." The use of the passive voice means forgiveness is given without her request and she is now expressing her gratitude for God's divine love. This divine love is the foundation of our call to reconciliation with others. God's love instilled in us and lived out through us is how we achieve true reconciliation. We have to love others with the sincere, steadfast, and freely given love that God extends to us. Otherwise, we find ourselves trapped in the selfish cycle to not seek, extend, offer, and receive forgiveness.

All of this reminds me of the first parable that we started this series with, that of the Prodigal Son. Thompson points out: "God is represented in the figure of the father, who throws dignity to the wind and rushes out to meet his returning son. Filled with compassion, he embraces and kisses his son [cutting off his son's repentance speech] and then calls for a robe and ring as symbols of full restoration of his son's place of dignity in the family. The only fitting response of the son to this generous welcome," Thompson conjectures, "will be a life of humble gratitude, loving service, and willingness to forgive others their foolish and destructive choices. Thus, the father's response offers his son a new beginning within the family."

⁹ Thompson, 62.

¹⁰ Thompson, 63.

Some of us might be asking, “Where is the justice in all of this?” The prodigal son has squandered his inheritance and shamed the family name. Doesn’t he deserve some punishment? The sinful woman has broken the law and by her actions has even shamed a Pharisee. Where is the justice in this story? Going back to my previous observation, Jesus really does shake up our understanding of justice, doesn’t he? We instinctively desire some sort of retribution for sins committed. This retributive justice is pivotal to our current justice system. We impose penalties against the guilty and we seek varying degrees of satisfaction based on the magnitude of the infraction. Jesus, however, presents to us what Thompson calls “restorative justice.” Central to this is a restoration of harmony within a community or relationship, rather than retribution for the breach of some law. This is not about isolation and punishment, but about reconciliation and accountability. We are called to be reconciled as new creations and in new relationships. With this reconciliation comes a notion of accountability, where the offense that broke the relationship ought not to be repeated. Retributive justice has as a core assumption that the offender is just going to go back out there and do it again. Restorative justice, however, assumes that the community as a whole will work towards an education that will foster mutual respect and accountability.

The way of the cross, my dear friends, is this restoration. The cross event restores us to the position of Friend of God, the original post Adam & Eve held before the Fall. The Church is the community that restores sinners, and not just punishes them, demanding retribution. Restoration and reconciliation is not just a one-way, downward direction, it is the work of the Church. The way of the cross does not simply end with our reception of reconciliation. Instead, we are to continue that restoration and extend reconciliation through the sharing of divine love. The way of the cross is healing the wounds around us. The wounds we witness and the wounds we’ve created. Remember, we are bi-relational, and it isn’t enough to have reconciliation only between ourselves and God or ourselves and others. Our reconciliation to God *and* our neighbors is the very way of the cross. When we choose to walk this path as Christians, we are walking the path that Jesus places before us. Sometimes that path is challenging. Sometimes we even lose sight of the path. But if we open our hearts to the love of God and to the love of *all* of our neighbors—even our enemies—then we walk this path by faith and not by human sight.

Let us pray. “Great God, your ways are truly not our ways, and your thoughts are infinitely higher than our thoughts. Help us to grasp the nature of your justice within the wider realm of your mercy, just as your ocean of love washes over the ocean of our sin. Reveal to us what we need to see within our own minds and hearts, and lead us in your ways of life-renewing truth and peace.”¹¹ We pray this in the name of the crucified and risen Christ, the Prince of Peace. And all of God’s people said: Amen.

¹¹ Thompson, 90.