

**Forgiveness, Part I:  
The Foundation of All Forgiveness**  
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**Scripture Luke 7:36-50**

*One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak."*

*"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more? Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus 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 bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing 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 were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins? And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."*

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**I. You Get to Keep What You Give Away**

Since I arrived last December, quite a number of you have taken me up on my request to share three stories that tell me something about you. I sincerely thank those of you who have done this. If you haven't yet set up a time with me, let's get one on the calendar!

When I first made the request for your stories, I offered one of my own – a story about my dad standing up to protect someone he disagreed with when I was around six years old. This morning, I'll share a second story – the story of a profoundly mystical experience I had in 1981 that turned me from becoming a solar energy research scientist to becoming a minister. It's a story I don't share often, but one that of the organizers of the Gandhi 3.0 Retreat I attended in India last month knew and asked me to share with the 42 people from 12 different countries who gathered at Gandhi's ashram. So now that my story has gone "world-wide," I may as well share it with you here in Niantic!

My story actually fits quite well into the theme of our series on forgiveness. Before sharing it, therefore, I'd like to offer a few thoughts about the relationship between forgiveness and

becoming a loving person so that, when I get to my story, you'll see why it may be relevant to more than just me.

In order to speak meaningfully about forgiveness, however, I first need to share a word or two about *sin*.

We don't like to talk much about "sin" in the Mainline Church. I've always thought that's kind of weird. We get all uptight about preachers who talk about "sin" or Christians who are being "judgmental" in our view, yet we preach endlessly against racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia, ageism, ableism, greed, environmental degradation, and so on. What are these if not "sins"?

Many of you told me how much you loved the sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Terryln Curry Avery last week about "Dismantling Racism." I loved it, too. But make no mistake: she was talking about sin and salvation the whole time. Not salvation from eternal hellfire and damnation – something that does not actually exist in Reality – but salvation from the hell of racism, which really does exist, and on levels we can scarcely imagine, especially if we have never been victimized by racism.

Really, Christians should be the last people to be ashamed or embarrassed to talk about sin. We should be glad and happy to talk about sin because, at least if Jesus is our guide rather than, say, televangelists, sin cannot be separated even by a millimeter from *God's love, grace, and forgiveness*. The more we speak about the bad stuff, the more we get to speak meaningfully about the best stuff.

In our passage this morning, Jesus makes an observation that most people would find startling: "One who is forgiven little loves little." (Luke 7:47)

Let's pause for a moment to let this statement really sink in.

If one who is forgiven little loves little, then it stands to reason that if you want to love a lot, you need to be forgiven a lot – just like the person Jesus refers to who has been forgiven 500 days wages as opposed to 50.

Does this mean we need to go out and sin a lot more than we already have in order to be more loving? Well, if you were listening to Rev. Dr. Curry's sermon last week, you would already know the answer to this question. Most of us are, for instance, more racist than we think we are. If you want to find enough sins to be forgiven for in order to become a supremely loving person, look no further than your own racism. If this doesn't make you loving enough, there are a host of other "isms" where you can find sin lurking if you are truly open to seeing it.

Yet lest you think that you can simply get forgiven for a lot of sin and become a supremely loving person for the rest of your life, bear in mind that if you want to *stay* supremely loving there is one important caveat: According to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray – the Lord's Prayer - we can have all the love and grace we could ever need, *but we only get to keep what we can give away*.

If this little caveat surprises you, consider what you are praying for in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses (sins) *as we forgive those who have trespassed (sinned) against us.*" In

other words, when we join Jesus in praying this prayer, we are offering God our acceptance of this caveat. We are praying ultimately to be forgiven only to the extent that we forgive others.

Yikes! While it is not always possible to forgive someone who has hurt us – such as when the person continues to inflict harm without the slightest sense of remorse – it is worth noting that it is in our self-interest to forgive all the sins we possibly can.

This claim is not theoretical. Everyday experience is all the proof we need to verify that Jesus knows what he's talking about. When you forgive others their sins, it clears a channel within you to experience the joy and freedom that comes with your own forgiveness.

You've heard it said that people who are harsh on others tend to be harsh on themselves. It actually starts when the person receives forgiveness and refuses to offer forgiveness to others. When you refuse to forgive someone asks for forgiveness and backs their request up with actions, how did you feel afterward? Does it not make you a harsher critic of your own actions? In refusing to forgive, you clog the channel that allows you to forgive yourself for your own misdeeds.

If left unchecked, this dynamic can turn into a vicious cycle. By refusing to forgive others, it makes it doubly hard to forgive yourself ... which makes it triply hard to forgive others ... which makes it quadruply hard to forgive yourself ... and so on. Jesus tells a parable about this extremely difficult feedback loop in his Parable of the Unforgiving Servant which we'll cover next week. (Matthew 18:21-35)

I know this vicious cycle first-hand. Judging others always leads to self-judgement. Condemning others always leads to self-condemnation. If I'm not extremely vigilant about offering grace and forgiveness to others, my own shortcomings ultimately become my obsession.

## **II. The Gift that Keeps on Giving**

This cycle has happened so often in my life that I have also learned how to clear the channel and become joyful and free again. It just so happens that even though we are stingy with Grace, God is generous. There is always a way back when we have turned away from God.

What I do to unclog the channel is think back to a time when I received far more grace than the amount of grace I need to give to someone else. Then I focus on re-receiving this grace again. I feel its warmth pulse through my veins and its power course through my blood. I feel the release of burden and the joy flood in all over again. It creates a "cup runneth over" experience within me that is great enough to flow beyond myself and soak someone else in grace.

The beauty of God's love and grace is that, once it is given, God never takes it back. The only way to cut oneself off from it is to either refuse the gift in the first place, or keep on condemning others.

The particular experience I tend to think back to when my forgiveness channel is clogged, happened on May 31, 1981. You could call this my Professional-Strength Drano Experience.

I was a junior in high school. I had a friend named Becky (not her real name) who was going through a very difficult situation. One day, as she was walking home along a dimly lit road at dusk, someone in a ski mask tried to rape her. Somehow, she managed to struggle free and flee physically unharmed. I say *physically* unharmed. *Emotionally* she struggled quite a lot, especially since it happened in her neighborhood. She had no idea who the perpetrator was.

Adding to her distress, she had only two weeks earlier been visiting her grandfather in the hospital who was undergoing cancer treatment. Her grandfather's immune system had been compromised so the hospital was only allowing close family to visit, and then only if completely healthy.

The morning after Becky visited her grandfather she woke up with a terrible sore throat. A couple days later her grandfather fell ill and died. In Becky's mind, she had killed her grandfather! She was wracked with guilt.

One evening we were at my home talking about all this. I told her that six months earlier I had discovered a powerful way to deal productively with my own struggles. I told her I'd learned to pray. Specifically, I'd learned how to pray in a way that didn't simply offer your laundry list to God and expect everything would come out alright. I had learned to be silent, to simply dwell in God's presence, and let whatever happens happen.

That got us into a deep conversation about God that lasted well into the evening. My mother finally came into the living room and told me it was time to take Becky home. We drove to her house and parked outside still deep in conversation. At one point while Becky was speaking a thought entered my head. It concerned her grandfather and the guilt she was feeling about him. The thought was simple: "Tell Becky, 'It's okay.'"

We weren't talking about her grandfather at the moment so I let the thought go and continued to listen. The thought came back: "Tell Becky 'It's okay.'" I didn't. The thought returned several more times. Each time I pushed it out of my mind and continued listening. The thought became more insistent: "Tell Becky 'It's okay!'" Finally, I could hardly concentrate on anything but this thought. It had grown so strong I was even picturing her grandfather in my mind saying this over and over. So I broke in and, feeling rather stupid, said, "Becky, there's something I think I'm supposed to tell you with respect to your grandfather: *It's okay.*"

What happened next defies explanation. In fact, though I have tried at certain times in the last forty-two years to describe it logically, I still can find no better way to describe accurately what happened than to speak in metaphor. Bear in mind that what I'm about to tell you *did not physically happen this way*, but it gets more to the point than anything I can describe through other means:

It was like a giant explosion suddenly took place. The car filled with the light of ten thousand suns. Time utterly stopped in its tracks and we were filled with the greatest sense of God's presence and love we'd ever experienced. God was right there. In the car! Only, there was no longer any "there" or "car." There wasn't really even an "us." There was only Infinity and infinity was LOVE. This love was fully aware of who we were, aware of everything we'd ever done or left undone, aware of every cell and molecule in our bodies, aware of every breath. The love was so intense that if we were to add up all the love we'd ever experienced in our entire lives and multiplied it a thousand times it would still amount to little more than a tiny sliver of the love we experienced. We felt this love for ourselves, and for all people. *All* people,

no matter who they were, loved beyond their wildest imagination. We wept uncontrollably at the majesty of the awareness. At the awe and wonder of it all.

How long did this experience last? I wouldn't have a clue if I had not looked at the clock on the dashboard after the dust settled a bit and the awareness subsided. It was 11:30 pm. The last time I'd noticed the time before the encounter, it was 11:00 pm. If there had been no clock, I wouldn't have been able to tell you even moments after the experience whether it lasted a minute or several hours.

We sat back in our seats, mostly in silence, for the better part of an hour trying to catch our breath. "What on earth just happened?" Becky asked. "I have no idea." Our heads were spinning. Our hearts were pounding so fast you'd swear we'd just run a marathon.

I guess I should clarify a couple of things at this point. We did not have sex that night! Becky and I were just friends in a completely platonic relationship. Nor had we consumed any mind-altering substances or eaten or drank anything out of the ordinary. We'd simply talked.

Eventually, Becky got out of the car and I drove home in a daze. Upon arrival, I went into my parent's bedroom to tell them I'd returned, as was the custom. They were asleep. I woke up my mother saying, "Mom, I've just had an intense spiritual experience with Becky."

She mumbled something incomprehensible and I left the room. A few minutes later there was a knock on my bedroom door. My mother entered asking, "What did you just say?!"

The rest, as they say, is history.

I know from our "Getting to Know You" sessions that many of you can also look back to some pretty dramatic experiences of God's love and grace yourselves. The drama of the experience is not ultimately what is important. I have yet to meet a single person who cannot find at least one experience of grace that is powerful enough to overcome our resistance to forgiving others their sins.

"One who has been forgiven little loves little." One who has been forgiven much loves much.

Are you feeling disconnected from God's love and grace this morning? Then get forgiven! Someone sitting down the pew from you may very well be more than happy to forgive you, if you ask. Then, don't just receive forgiveness, give it away to someone who stands in need of it.