**Holy Vessels: Forgiveness and Restoration**

**Luke 15:11-32**

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For the last four weeks, we have been talking about the journey from brokenness to healing. We’ve talked about all the ways we become broken, and the church as a community of brokenness, healing, and hope.  We’ve heard stories from people in our own congregation about their journeys, and last week we explored reclaiming and repurposing broken parts of ourselves. Because next weekend is youth worship, this is the last in the series before Easter when we celebrate resurrection. Today our theme is forgiveness and restoration.

For the most part in this series, we’ve been talking about brokenness within - our own experiences of hurt, loss, grief, shame, and woundedness.  Yet, very often when we ourselves become broken, at least one relationship is broken, too. Perhaps it is our relationship with God when we veer off God’s path for us and into some distraction or addiction.  Or, perhaps it is a relationship with someone who has hurt us or with a person whom we have hurt. For us to continue on the journey toward healing and wholeness there comes a time to examine those relationships and what it would mean for them to be restored.

So, over the next minute or two, I would like you to think of a relationship in your life that is wounded or broken.  One in which the brokenness lies unresolved. We all have them. Perhaps it is with a bully from your childhood. Maybe it is with a parent or child, a colleague or lost friend.  Maybe it is with God or the church.

The problem with unresolved relationships is that, no matter how we might try to ignore them, the brokenness remains and almost always leads to bitterness, anger, or shame.  God created us to be social creatures. We cannot be free to live the abundant life God created us for until we have looked at our relationships and brought them to a place of peace and restoration.

Now, let me say up front that restoration doesn’t necessarily mean reconciliation.   With some relationships, reconciliation isn’t possible or healthy. If the person has died or refuses to work with you, or if that person is abusive and dangerous to you, you can still be restored but the relationship cannot or should not. For you, restoration comes through the process of forgiveness, as you yourself are restored to wholeness - to the whole person you were before this broken relationship. That said, in many relationships reconciliation is possible; through hard work, humility, and compassion, you can be reconciled with the person you hurt or the person who hurt you.

So, let’s take a look at Jesus’ story of the prodigal son.  As you reflect on the story from your own life that I asked you to bring to mind a few minutes ago, which of the characters in Jesus’ story are you most like?  If you caused the break in your relationship, you might identify most with the younger son. You may be the one in need of forgiveness from yourself and from the person you hurt.  In his wonderful book on forgiveness, Adam Hamilton outlines the stages of repentance, of recognizes you need to be forgiven. First, you become aware that you’ve done something to hurt the other person.  Then, rather than creating excuses or rationalizations for yourself, you acknowledge remorse for the pain you’ve caused. You go to that person and apologize, asking them to forgive you. Then, and this might be the hardest part, you work at change.  The first three steps - awareness, regret, and apology - don’t mean much if you don’t try to change.

So, if we look again at the story of the prodigal son, we see that the younger son becomes aware that he’s made a mistake, he regrets it, and he expresses remorse, but we don’t get to see whether he really changes.  His actions the day after the big party will make all the difference on how the rest of the story unfolds.

Because what he did didn’t only hurt his father, he hurt his older brother, as well.  In fact, the older brother gets a double whammy. His younger brother takes off with half the inheritance leaving him as the only help to their father while he stays and does what he is supposed to do - undoubtedly resenting that he has twice the work to do and none of the fun his brother is having in squandering their father’s wealth.  Plus, his father then throws this big party for his younger brother seeming to ignore the faithfulness and hard work of the older.

For the two brothers to be reconciled, the older will have to accept the apology of the younger and forgive him - but he also will need to see a real change in the younger brother’s behavior.  Otherwise, he will stay the bitter and angry man we see in the story. How does he begin the process of forgiveness? Referring back to Hamilton’s book, he can start by recognizing his own shortcomings - perhaps that he is short-tempered or quick to judge.  He can choose to assume the best rather than the worst about his brother. And he can pray for his brother - pray that the younger brother will grow in wisdom and maturity and responsibility.

In our lives, those three steps may not be enough.  Depending on the extent of the brokenness, the depth of the pain, it may take counseling and a lot of time before we can get to the point of forgiving - and that’s okay.  The important thing is to work at it rather than letting the hurt fester and grow.

You’ll notice that I haven’t said anything yet about the father.  As you reflect on the broken relationship you have held in your mind since the beginning of this sermon, if you find you identify most with the father, than good for you! The father, of course, represents God in the story. God, who runs toward us with open arms when we have screwed up. God, who is ready with absolute, unconditional love and acceptance as soon as we turn back from where we have strayed.  If we’re honest most of us, maybe all of us have a ways to go before we reach that kind of perfection in love. Yet, it is the purpose of our journey of faith, the goal we work toward, and the example that Jesus sets for us.

All through his ministry, Jesus taught about forgiveness.  When the disciples asked him how often they should forgive someone who hurts them, they ask is seven times enough?  Jesus answers seventy times seven. He taught his disciples the prayer we call the Lord’s Prayer including the words “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”.  At the last supper, or the first Communion, he told his disciples to drink from the cup poured out for them and for us for the forgiveness of sins. And, of course, even as he hung on the cross, he cried out to God, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.”

Jesus understood that for the individual and for the relationship, restoration - the healing of brokenness - begins with forgiveness. Forgiving is largely the internal work of the person who has been hurt.  Forgiving is letting go of the right to retaliate. Forgiving is not allowing the hurt of the past to continue to limit or harm you. Forgiving, as has often been said, is letting go of the hope for a different past.  That process restores the individual and puts them in right relationship with God, as well.

For the relationship to be restored, it takes willingness, humility, time and commitment from both parties.  That can be daunting, yet we know from God’s work in the world through Jesus, that when it is both possible and healthy, reconciliation is what we’re called toward.  This meal we are about to share at the Communion table represents God’s ongoing work toward reconciliation with and within the world. When we participate in Communion, we reaffirm our promise to be part of that work.

Through these weeks as we have talked about brokenness and healing, we’ve used glass to represent the journey.  We had broken, rough, sharp pieces of glass to represent our own broken places. We created a community of brokenness and hope represented by our broken pieces of glass joined together in this vase.  We talked about how beach glass is broken glass that has been polished and smoothed by the journey of faith and how its beauty shines through when washed in living water. Finally, we talked about creating a new and different picture of our lives - reclaimed, repurposed and now forgiven and restored.

In a few moments, when you come up for Communion, you are invited to choose a rock or shell, a piece of glass that represents your own Lenten journey from brokenness to healing and place it in the glass bowl.  Over the summer, Linda Haywood will take all the pieces we’ve chosen and create a mosaic out of them. A mosaic we will unveil at the fall kick-off to represent the community we are, healed and redeemed by God’s love, and ready to serve others and offer God’s love to the world.

May it be so. Amen.