
Practicing Forgiveness

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

Lent 4 – Year C

The Prodigal Son is one of the great passages in Holy Scripture. That is why today I would like for us to focus on the concept of forgiveness.

The reason we love and keep telling this parable is because forgiveness is a central tenant of our faith. Yet, in my life (and in yours), this central tenant becomes very hard to put into practice.

The struggle we face in our personal lives and relationships is also the struggle in today's gospel—how do we practice forgiveness? How are we to forgive?[\[1\]](#)

Every Sunday we hear the words of absolution: “Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ...” At that moment in the liturgy God embraces us as the father embraces the prodigal son. It is a holy moment of grace and forgiveness.

And Christ's forgiveness is such a powerful experience that we are called to share it with others. St. Paul writes, “Forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Yet, herein lies the problem. I am called to practice forgiveness, but my actions, attitude, and even my words reflect the disposition of the older brother—*My brother doesn't deserve it. Why are we throwing him a party? This is going to happen again? Dad, you are being a human doormat.*

I am supposed to extend forgiveness, but I can't seem to do it. Why? Well, it comes down to the fact that I have been wronged. I have been hurt, or someone I love has been hurt, or the person I need to forgive is beyond redemption.

So, how do we learn to practice forgiveness? How do we bridge the gap of what we are supposed to do versus what we actually do?

Thankfully, scripture offers some insight. We are called to “imitate Christ.”

St. Paul tells the Ephesians to “imitate God” (Ephesians 5:1), and he tells the Philippians “to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

Now, I have found imitating Christ to be a wonderful spiritual practice, often revealing to me what it means to live a Christian life; however, things begin to break down when the rubber hits the road, especially when it comes to forgiveness.

Let me offer an analogy as to why imitating Christ can take us only so far:

My dream is to consistently drive the golf ball 280 yards. One of the ways to accomplish this goal is to imitate someone who always drives the golf ball over 280 yards.

So, I look at someone like Dustin Johnson and note how he sets his wrist at the top of his backswing, or study the angle of his club during his downswing. Then, I go into my backyard and imitate aspects of his swing, hoping it will enable me to hit a 280-yard drive.

However, when I step onto the first tee, guess what happens? You guessed it. I hit the ball around 220 yards with a nasty hook or vicious slice that inevitably puts the ball in the woods behind a tree.

Thus, I have concluded that the only way to drive like Dustin Johnson, is in fact if Dustin Johnson were to occupy my body and hit my tee shot for me!

This analogy offers two important points when it comes to forgiveness: 1. Imitation can only take us so far, and 2. We need to remember that someone is actually in our body helping us do the impossible.

Yes, we have been buried and raised with Christ. Our Eucharistic Prayer tells us that Christ is in us and that we are in him (BCP, 342-343).

St. Paul tells the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2: 19-20).

Martin Luther, who I will be talking about in the Dean’s Forum, writes, that Christ “is fixed and cemented to me and abides in me...Christ and I are one” (Lectures on Galatians, 1535).

When we understand the depth of our relationship with Christ, we have this profoundly personal experience of forgiveness.

Yet, here is what all this means when it comes to practicing forgiveness: You are united with Christ at your baptism, but Christ also died for and extends forgiveness to the very person that has wronged you.

In essence, Jesus Christ, who dwells within us, the source of all that we are and our whole being, in fact extends forgiveness to those in our lives whom we need to forgive!

So, the way we practice forgiveness is by learning to embrace and participate in Christ’s forgiveness, something that dwells within each of us.

Notice that this is exactly what the father tells the older son: “Son, you are always with me (“fixed and cemented,” to borrow Luther’s words), and all that is mine is yours.”

The father realizes the process of forgiveness will not be easy for the older son...forgiveness never is. Sometimes it takes years, and maybe even a lifetime for forgiveness to come to completion.

The father isn’t demanding the older son to immediately forgive; rather, he is asking the older son to participate in the forgiveness he has bestowed upon the prodigal son.

So, as we journey toward the cross this season of Lent, recognize that participating in Christ’s forgiveness might very well be the first step toward practicing forgiveness and learning to embracing those who have done us wrong.

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross so that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen. (BCP, 101)

[i] This sermon draws extensively upon the work of Miroslav Volf’s book “Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace.”