

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

LENT 4 Sunday March 6th, 2016

A Reflection by Peggy Jensen

Prayer: Merciful God, thank-you for forgiving us time after time and welcoming us always as your beloved children. Expand our hearts that we might be agents of reconciliation in our families and in our faith community here on Gabriola Island. May the thoughts and words that we share be Your inspiration for us today. Amen

Where are you in this familiar “Prodigal Son” story?

Are you the mother who is worrying about her son who wandered off into the unknown? No phone call or email, just emptiness?

Are you the Dad who emptied the savings account to help pay for his daughter’s education and now she is off in Southeast Asia to “find herself”?

Are you the grandparent who can give thanks for the four grand-children who are happily married and settled into their careers? Now you are at peace or are you worrying about the one grand-son or grand-daughter you never hear from?

Are you the sister who is left to look after mom in her last stages of life, feeling exhausted by the care-giving and critical of the freedom your siblings?

Have you ever been like the younger son, who wanted everything right now!

Live life in the moment! Take the inheritance and enjoy life. Wandered and squandered!

So who do you relate to in this story?

Have there been times when you fit into each of the roles?

When have you asked for forgiveness? Have you ever turned around and hoped for forgiveness and reconciliation in a relationship? When have you received forgiveness from God?

Forgiveness and reconciliation are the focus of this parable.

They are not the same and they don’t happen automatically.

Forgiveness: Google definition: *Compassionate feelings for someone that make it easier to forgive that person for some offense. That is called **forgiveness**. Feelings of forgiveness make it easier to feel empathy toward people who have harmed you.*

Christian definition: **Forgiveness is God’s work.** We understand that Jesus Christ, God’s son, stretched out his arms and died to forgive our sins. The ultimate forgiveness. The vastness and depth of the love, grace, compassion and justice of God. In the parable today, the forgiveness offered by the father is an example of the extravagance of God’s love and grace offered to each one of us. You already figured out that the Father represented God, right!

You can wander away from God. Maybe it is a spiritual wandering, maybe it is life choices that take you away. When you realize that you want to turn around and return to God, God’s arms are outstretched waiting for you. Like the prodigal child we are welcomed back into the love of God. God does not rejoice in our wrongdoing but rejoices in our return. God’s forgiveness and love is unconditional!

How do we offer forgiveness to others?

What about reconciliation?

Google definition: *Reconciliation is the act of getting two things to be compatible with one another. You might have a reconciliation with a former enemy. Reconciliation can be the restoration of friendly relations.*

The scripture reading from Corinthians reminds us that we have a ministry of reconciliation: .
“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

There are a lot of theological nuances here but I do want to focus on reconciliation.

Some of you may have been using Bishop Logan’s Sacred Journey Daily Meditations.

I have found them quite powerful. This week he has been reflecting on this passage from Corinthians and the ministry of reconciliation. Bishop Logan writes:

Henry Nouwen speaks to us about reconciliation being rooted in God’s love for us by sending Jesus to us. A non-judgmental or non-condemning presence is essential for reconciliation. God does not expect us to be perfect to begin the ministry of reconciliation. It is in intentionally walking the journey of reconciliation that we will learn what it is to reconcile. To be intentional requires us to listen, be aware and walk humbly with God first, and then with the other person.

According to Henri Nouwen, our task as Christians is reconciliation.

Reconciliation is our task because God sent Jesus to reconcile us with God. As people reconciled with God through Jesus Christ, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. So whatever we do, the main question is: “Does it lead to reconciliation among people?”

In other words, reconciliation is restoring good in a relationship that has been severed by mistrust, dishonesty and disrespect. Through Jesus, the good in us is restored. God now sees us as trustworthy, honest and respectful people and we are asked to live that in our daily living.

How do we work for reconciliation? First and foremost we must claim for ourselves that God, through Christ, has reconciled us to God. It is not enough to believe this with our heads. We have to let the truth of this reconciliation permeate every part of our being. As long as we are not fully and thoroughly convinced that we have been reconciled with God, that we are forgiven, that we have received new hearts, new spirits, new eyes to see and new ears to hear, we continue to create divisions among people because we expect from them a healing power they do not possess.

*Only when we fully trust that we belong to God and can find in our relationship with God all that we need for our soul, heart and mind can we be truly free in this world and be ministers of reconciliation. This is not easy; we readily fall back into self-doubt and self-rejection. We need to be constantly reminded through God’s Word, the sacraments and the love of our neighbours, that we are indeed reconciled.**

Of course Bishop Logan is focusing on our relationships with the First Nations people as he undertakes this sacred walking journey from Alert Bay to Victoria. This is a very important focus not just for Lent but as all of us work towards right relationships with aboriginal people.

Let's take on more look at the characters in the story of the Prodigal son. I also want to refer to Henri Nouwen. In his book The Return of the Prodigal Son, Nouwen comments on the Elder Son: " When I listen carefully to the words with which the elder son attacks his father – self-righteousness, self-pitying, jealous words –I hear a deeper complaint. It is the deeper complaint that comes from the heart that feels it never received what was due. It is the complaint expressed in countless subtle and not so subtle ways forming a bedrock of human resentment. Complaining is self-perpetuating and counterproductive. A complainer is hard to live with, and very few people know how to respond to the complaints made by a self-rejecting person."

Do you see the elder son as being self-centered and just looking after his own interests?

I see both sons as being self-centered and focused on self-perpetuating ideals. The younger son came to the realization that he had to change and go a new way. The elder son was not there yet! One of the great equations of life is that rights without responsibilities are a cul-de-sac.

Many congregations act like the elder son. A self-righteous group of people who have focused on self-perpetuating ideals and keep the church running the way it has always been. A congregation who sees no need to change. They are the responsible ones who have served on all the committees and then done another term because no one else was willing to do their part. Sometimes the most faithful, dedicated, church goers are the last to ask for forgiveness and to seek reconciliation.

What about your role in this community of faith? In many ways you have been the faithful dedicated folk who have kept everything going. There is no criticism for your diligence. Sometimes a preacher can get in over her head. The connection I hoped to make is this.

Over the past few years there has been some complaints and criticisms. Several folk have left and you wonder if they will return. It may be difficult to welcome back some of those who have been away for a while. Perhaps some of them will come to the AGM next week. What kind of reception can you offer? Maybe the forgiveness and reconciling of a relationship needs to be with someone you see every week. Often people hold on to resentments and old memories for too long. They can get in the way of forgiveness and reconciliation. Are there stumbling blocks that you can't get past. Remember, you can always come and talk to me about it, confidentially

Last week, in the comments for the Transition Team somebody wrote: "**We need to learn how to forgive.**". That brings the forgiveness and reconciliation work right here and now.

Please think carefully and prayerfully about your personal responsibility for forgiveness and the reconciliation work that needs to be done here. God offers us unconditional forgiveness and love. May we be gifted with the grace to do that too. Amen