

## **He Was Lost and Now Is Found**

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

January 6, 2013

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

There are not many moments in my life when I wished that I could press a button and have a do over, but one of them happened when I was 12 years old. It was at one of the many family get togethers with my father's side of the family. My Dad has three brothers, and as a result I have a number of cousins. Back when I was a kid we all lived pretty close to each other, and so we would often get together at the holidays, birthdays, and in the summer.

I don't recall exactly the occasion for this particular event but I do remember we were at my uncle Gordon's house. I was hanging out with my cousin Ed in his room. He had just received a new BB gun, and he was showing it off to the other boys. I was admiring the gun, seeing how it felt to hold it. It felt good. To an adolescent male, guns are power; even when it is just a BB gun. Soon we were arguing over who got to hold it and for how long. Typical dumb stuff that kids argue about. As a result I had gotten pretty upset with my cousin Scott. I got so mad, in fact, that I accidentally shot him in the back with the BB gun. I

certainly hadn't meant to do so. I didn't even know that it was loaded. Needless to say my cousin Scott was pretty upset. He is about five years younger than I am, and he screamed in pain and started to cry. He promptly ran to the adults and told them what had transpired.

I was lucky of course. Scott was fine, although the BB did break the skin. But back in Omaha I worked with a fellow who grew up in Omaha and had not been so lucky. His name was John and when he was a boy his friend Jimmy had shown him an actual gun. While they were playing with it, the gun went off, and Jimmy was fatally shot. Fifty years later, John was still so wracked with guilt that he contacted me to do a memorial service for the family. The family of this boy had forgiven John long ago, but he found it hard to find peace for himself.

While my carelessness with a BB gun did not have nearly such dire consequences, I knew a little bit about the searing guilt and shame that he felt. These many years later I have no memory of my punishment for shooting my cousin Scott in the back with a BB gun. I am sure I got yelled at, at the very least. But it was nothing compared to what I was doing to myself. I felt *so bad* about shooting my cousin. I couldn't believe I had done it. I knew better—it was just a flat out bone-headed thing to do. Obviously I apologized profusely to Scott for having shot him. I don't think he had the wherewithal in the moment to actually offer forgiveness. He was too busy nursing his new battle scar. I don't think he officially forgave me.

Many years later, probably about five years ago, there was yet another Snyder family get together. My generation has scattered somewhat, so nowadays they mostly happen in the summer when all of us are around. At one point I was drinking beer with my male cousins, and my cousin Ed brought up the BB gun incident. Everyone remembered it crystal clear. Scott and I have a good relationship now so we just laughed it off as a childhood memory to joke about. Although it may interest you to know that my cousin Ed, who had rather nonchalantly passed around his BB gun for all of us to admire, went on to serve in the Army and at one point was stationed in Yugoslavia! Kind of scary thought now that I consider it.

Probably never before or since have I ever felt the burning need to have someone forgive me for what I had done. It was a painfully urgent desire at them time. Our theme for the month of January is forgiveness. This morning I want to use the parable of prodigal son as a metaphor for forgiveness. Henri Nouwen, in his analysis of Rembrandt's painting of the Return of the Prodigal Son, goes into some detail of each of the characters. Nouwen would say that in the example of me shooting my cousin Scott in the back, I was in the position of the Prodigal Son himself. I was "lost" and needed forgiveness. By "lost" he does not mean that I didn't know where I was or what I was doing. Rather that by committing this act I was acting out of character. I had a vision or image of myself and who I was, and shooting people in the back with a

BB gun was contrary to that image. I acted out of character, and in some sense I was “lost” to myself. The more out of character the action is, the greater the need to be forgiven. This was certainly the case for John who is a kind and gentle man. Killing a child is as far from his character as anything could be, and thus the reason why his action has haunted him through the decades. Like all of us at one time or another, John needed to hear those sweet words of forgiveness from the Father in the parable, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

After having spent many years preaching and teaching, leading groups on social action issues and running a center for mentally handicapped adults, Henri Nouwen needed a break. He spent part of his vacation in St. Petersburg, specifically in Catherine the Great’s Hermitage. For it is in the museum there that the original Return of the Prodigal Son resides. He spent two days staring at one painting taking notes. Nouwen reflects that in fact all of us are all three characters in the Prodigal Son story at one time or another. If you are in a relationship where you know you have made a mistake and you need to be forgiven, then you are like the son who knows that he has squandered his father’s inheritance and must now beg to be allowed to be a stable hand. But there are other relationships in which we can play the part of the father or the older brother too.

My friend Don has been my best friend since childhood. He and I were inseparable—like brothers. His mother was like a second mother to me. His brother one of my closest friends when I am back home. Unfortunately Don had a tumultuous love life. Somehow he just couldn't find a girl with, let us say, healthy boundaries. He had some attraction for women who were clingy and controlling. His first wife he married when he was just out of high school. Sadly she was very manipulative, and yet Don couldn't see it. While she and I didn't get along, I was getting used to her right when their marriage fell apart.

Don's second wife was less controlling, but rather disengaged in the relationship. After a couple of years she simply up and left, with barely a note left behind to explain her absence. It was after the second wife left that his brother and I made a vow that if Don started going down this road again, we would say something. Sure enough Don had dated a woman about three times and he had that crazy gleam in his eye. For some reason he was going back to manipulative and clingy again. So I pulled him aside and said, "Man, just slow down and think. Don't rush into anything too quickly." Wise counsel I thought at the time, and I stick to it, but he did not listen.

Wife number three was smarter. She and Don moved out of state, he quit his job, he stopped talking to his parents, and yes his friends too. Then one day, after he failed yet again to return my phone calls, I finally got the message. This friendship was over. There was no big blow up,

no dramatic argument to mark its ending—it just ended with a whimper. This was a very sad thing for me, and I mourned the loss of our friendship as if it had been a death. This included feeling betrayal and anger. All of the stages of grief were there.

In this case, I was like the older brother in the prodigal son parable. I had done everything right; I was the one who had been wronged. I enjoyed feeling superior and righteous. It is a shallow consolation prize for being jilted, but in the moment it is all one has. However I noticed that there is a price to pay for withholding forgiveness. It is very limiting. You are less free. This is certainly true from an emotional perspective. I spent a lot of emotional energy in being angry, no matter how justified I had convinced myself it was. This is exhausting. The more I held on to that anger the less I could think and feel other things.

Relationally my grudge was also limiting. As I said, Don's Mom was like a second mother to me. Prior to the advent of Facebook, I had almost no contact with her even though I had absolutely no problem with her. If anything she had been victimized by her son and daughter-in-law even more than I had. But seeing her opened up old wounds, and as the years went by it was easier to do other things. I very much regret this because his Mom is a wonderful person, and my relationship with her is important to me. But the lack of forgiveness limited me. It took away choices and damaged relationships with people who had nothing to do with the falling out I had. I guess you could call that the karmic

dimension of not forgiving. Other people who have nothing to do with that relationship feel the cold reverberations when the warmth of forgiveness is absent.

Fortunately the advent of Facebook meant that I did reestablish my relationship with Don's mother. Two years ago, when I was back in Michigan, I went to his parent's house who hosted a barbeque. I saw his brother Bill, all his kids, even his grandmother who I remember from a few pleasant summer excursions to her house at the beach. It was old home week. Only Don was not there—he still lived out of state. However he had reestablished his relationships with his family and they were seeing him again. I was happy to hear this, but I had moved on. His Mom gave me Don's email. He and I exchanged some emails to say hey and catch up a bit, but it didn't go much further than that.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the difference between the older brother and the Father is maturity. Quite literally of course, the father is older than the brother is. But there is a notable difference in spiritual maturity too. Forgiveness requires that someone be the “bigger” person, as the saying goes. Meaning one or the other person sets aside their ego, makes themselves a little vulnerable, and reaches out to heal the relationship. In the parable, it is the Father who sets aside any hurt or pain he may have sustained at the insult committed against him by his younger son. You see asking for your inheritance while your father is alive was basically the younger son saying to his father “you are dead to

me!” The youngest son had severed that relationship with impunity. The father may have had every right to feel righteous and superior, as the older brother did. But the father is wiser and more mature. He enthusiastically jumps at the chance to forgive his youngest son. He had been lost to him and now was found. The father would leap at the chance for this resurrection—he cared not about how he might look, or if he was right, or even if it hurt the feelings of the loyal older son. Forgiveness is the healing effect of love. But it requires that we do the difficult spiritual work of growing up. Maturity means setting aside our small egos for the greater world of healing, freedom, and love. Make no mistake; it is a tall order and not an easy journey. By definition it means facing painful moments that have hurt you or others. But when we can let go, there is such sweet relief.

Last month I urged you all to think about what vision you would like to have for your life in the new year. Not merely a resolution but something deeper and broader than dropping a few holiday pounds. Of course every sermon I give, every charge to transformation I make to all of you, is also a charge to me, and in this case it was particularly personal. For when I took a step back and looked at my own life and my relationships, I realized that time and effort had healed a lot of things in my relationship with Don. It was less raw now. Some healing had happened. And so it was only just in the past few weeks that I have reached out to Don again, this time with an eye to really reestablishing

our friendship. Life is too short to be the older brother all of the time. One day I woke up and I was the father—ready, willing and able to embrace my friend because once he was lost and now he was found again. Let me tell you, offering forgiveness can be just as satisfying, just as much a relief, as it was getting forgiveness from my cousin years after I shot him.

I don't know where you are with whatever relationship you may have that is broken and raw for you right now. You might be the younger brother—burning with a desire to be forgiven for something you desperately wish you could take back. You might be the older brother—comfortable that you have been wronged and the other person needs to come crawling back on their hands and knees before you would even dare to speak to them again. You might be the loving Father, Jesus' metaphor for God himself—craning your neck out the window catching the first glimpse of the lost son returning to you and you are hurriedly putting on your coat to greet him in the road to embrace him with loving arms. Whichever one you are, and you are probably all three depending on the relationship in question, embrace forgiveness. Forgiveness is the mark of spiritual maturity. It is the fruit of our spiritual journey—one of the gifts of grace.

Let us not be stingy with forgiveness; either in offering it or asking for it. Because one of the marks of the beloved community is how readily we ask for and offer forgiveness to each other. This month, let

us resolve to be generous with forgiveness when we are ready. And if we are not ready, then let us do the work on ourselves necessary to get to the place where we can forgive. I hope and pray that this church is a place where that work can take place. For if we were to all be more forgiving, then our community would become a center of hope and healing for all to see. May it be so in this new year. Amen Blessed be.