

The Forgiving Child

Luke 15:11-32

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“My life did not really begin until I summoned the power to forgive my father for making my childhood a long march of terror...,”¹ reflects Tom Wingo in Pat Conroy’s *Prince of Tides*. Now the Wingo household was hardly the average American family by any stretch of the imagination, as you know if you have read the book or seen the movie. The scenes are far too severe, the relationships stretched to exaggerated limits, the feelings and tensions within the family too extreme to fit precisely into the experience of most of us here, and yet, in the exaggerated lives of Conroy’s characters, one is apt, I suspect, to encounter episodes not too far out of the range of our own experience. Moreover, it is always the author’s literary prerogative to exaggerate reality in order to focus on ordinary reality, and so Tom Wingo confesses:

My life did not really begin until I summoned the power to forgive my father for making my childhood a long march of terror. Without equivocation, I will tell you, he was a terrible and destructive father. Yet, it will always remain one of life’s mysteries that I would one day come to feel an abiding compassion for the man, and a frayed, nervous love. His fists were the argosies of his rule and empowerment. But his eyes were the eyes of my father, and something in those eyes always loved me even when his hands could not. He brought no natural talent to the dilemma of loving his family properly. He had developed none of the soft gifts of fatherhood. We mistook his love songs for battle hymns. His attempts at reconciliation were mistaken for brief and insincere cease-fires in a ferocious war of attrition. He lacked all finesse and tenderness....He had mined all harbors...all approaches to his heart....My life did not really begin until I summoned the power to forgive my father.²

I wonder if the elder brother in the biblical parable which is our lesson—not the Prodigal, now, we know about him—but I wonder if the elder brother, that is, the one who stayed home, I wonder if he ever came to the point of confessing with Tom Wingo: “My life did not really begin until I summoned the power to forgive my father...,” because he had every right to be unforgiving and furious—which he obviously was, from the story—wouldn’t even go to the party, remember? Who could blame him? I’ve stayed home from a party or two out of spite, haven’t you? And for less reasons than he. The elder brother had every legitimate right, every human right, to be miffed. After all, it was he who had stayed home, done the work, cared for the aging—not always congenial or appreciative—parents, while the kid brother kicked up heels in the far country, doing all those things responsible siblings only fantasize. But it was he—the elder—who had adhered to every “ought,” always obedient, responsible, duty-bound, attentive to every expectation, while the kid brother broke every rule in the book. And then, as if to prove the old adage, “It was the nice guy who came in last.”

There was no party for the elder brother, no robe, no ring on the finger, no fatted calf, no father's embrace until well into the party, when the father finally noticed the older brother's absence and searched outside to find him sulking in the shadows, whereupon the father stammered through some feeble effort at an explanation, albeit unconvincing, one suspects. One reads the story and wonders if the obedient child could ever come to forgive the father for what he perceived to be an insensitive act of favoritism, because Jesus never tells us in the story. Jesus just leaves the lad outside, churning with resentment. Every clink of a champagne glass, another chilling reminder of the father's unfairness, every tune the orchestra plays, another refrain to this requiem to a precious relationship slowly dying.

The larger story, of course, is the classic biblical account of sin and reconciliation, and for that reason the spotlight is usually focused on the prodigal, whereas the main character, the hero of the story, turns out to be the forgiving father. It is the paradigm parable of God's forgiving, embracing love with which each one of us can identify. Little wonder its timeless popularity. Every now and again, preachers have turned the sermon spotlight to the elder brother—usually, I am afraid, more to chastise than to empathize. For all of his accountability, the elder brother is too often too unfairly portrayed as self-righteous, self-absorbed, self-pitying, proud, unforgiving, and maybe all of that is so. I simply suggest this morning that we suspend judgment—as Jesus suspends judgment in the story—and that we ponder a bit the larger ramifications of the child's anger toward the father. I am not wise enough, nor insightful enough, to understand all the psychological implications of parent-child relationships, and surely I could never attempt in twenty minutes to do what Freud could not finish in a lifetime, but I have been around the block enough to recognize the wisdom of Tom Wingo's words: "My life did not really begin until I summoned the power to forgive my father." The same could be said of mothers, of course. Every child carries complaints about its parents, because, let's face it, no parent is perfect. And the difference between health and sickness, for many of us, lies precisely in our ability to forgive fathers and mothers. But now, from the perspective of older age, I think I can see it from both sides; that is, the need of parents to forgive children, but also the need for children to forgive parents.

I remember reading one time, though I cannot recall the source nor exactly how it went, but it was the confession of a young father as he reflected on an incident in which he had lost his temper and irrationally lashed out at his son for little cause. The words are an apologetic plea for forgiveness, spoken by a young father, and it went something like this: "You see, son, I've never been a father before, and I am having to learn to be a father, just as you are having to learn how to be a little boy, because fathers make mistakes, too. Fathers get angry and lose their tempers, and fathers feel bad and want to say it, but don't sometimes know how to say, 'I'm sorry.'" It's not easy being a father, but I am trying, and I am doing the best I can. I hope you will understand and forgive and help me to be a good father, and I will try to help you be a good little boy."

In about as poignant a piece of American literature as I think I have ever read, Moss Hart lifts a scene out of an earlier era to touch on this timeless theme.

We hurried on, our heads bent against the wind, to the cluster of lights ahead that was 149th Street and Westchester Avenue, and those lights

seemed to me to be the brightest lights I had ever seen. Tugging at my father's coat, I started down the line of pushcarts....I would merely pause before a pushcart to say, with as much control as I could muster, "Look at that chemistry set," or "There's a stamp album," or "Look at that printing press." Each time, my father would pause and ask the pushcart man the price. Then without a word we would move on to the next pushcart. Once or twice he would pick up a toy of some kind and look at it and then look at me, as if to suggest this might be something that I would like, but I was ten years old and a good deal beyond just a toy. My heart was set on a chemistry set or a printing press. There they were on every pushcart we stopped at, but the price was always the same, and soon I looked up and saw that we were nearing the end of the line—only two or three pushcarts remained. My father looked up, too, and I heard him jingle some coins in his pocket. In a flash I knew it all. He had gotten together about seventy-five cents to buy me a Christmas present, and he hadn't dared say so, in case there was nothing to be had for so small a sum. As I looked up at him I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I had ever been in life. I wanted to throw my arms around him and say it doesn't matter, I understand. This is better than a printing press or a chemistry set...I love you. Instead, we stood shivering beside each other for a moment, then turned away from the last two pushcarts and started silently back home. I didn't even take his hand on the way home, nor did he take mine. We were not on that basis. Nor did I ever tell him how close to him I felt that night—that for a little while the concrete wall between father and son had crumbled away and I knew that we were two lonely people struggling to reach each other.³

If children need a forgiving father, is it not also true that fathers need forgiving children? Isn't that the predicament in which we find this elder brother? For if he was ever to get on with his life—rejoin the family circle, regain a healthy sense of perspective—the elder brother needed to go back inside, not pouting or harboring resentment, and perhaps not even that night. Maybe he was entitled to his time of self-pity. After all, what had happened to him was not fair, but if he was ever going to get on with his life, he had better learn a bit of grace and understanding and forgiveness for the pain inflicted by a caring—if careless—father.

But now, what about God, for whom we have become accustomed to using the metaphor "Father"? What about our grudges against God? The pain we suffer, or think we suffer at God's hand? Someone said (sounds like Woody Allen), "If God loves me, why aren't I rich?", which seems absurd, but then, is it really, because obviously all God's children have not been gifted in equal measure? Very frankly, I would like to know why God did not make me smarter or taller, or with more hair, or richer. And I am one of the rich ones, especially when I think of some people in the world. And so, if I with all the abundance with which my life has been graced am tempted at times to exclaim, "O God, why have you forsaken me?", how much more agonizing must be the cries of some? I know it has long been regarded as taboo to talk about the grievances we hold against God. It is just poor taste, after all God has done, to talk about our disappointments, jealousies, and feelings of unfairness. It is like discussing

one's family squabbles in public, we tend to tuck such feelings inside until sometimes something happens that compels us honestly to explode and cry, "Why, O God?"

I know I have never had a feeling of more inadequacy in my entire ministry than that morning in Louisville when I was summoned to the home of a mother who had just received word that son was dead in Viet Nam. I went immediately, of course, but before ever even calling my name, before even opening the door, but shouting in rage through the screen, she said, "Why did God do this to me?" And though perhaps at another time, under different circumstances, I think I might have concocted some reasonable theological response, at the moment there seemed so little to say. Besides, I sensed that she had a right to her rage—even if misplaced. We moved away shortly afterward, and I lost all touch, but I have thought of her often, and I only hope that that mother has reached the point of broader theological understanding and found the spiritual resources within her to forgive God, if that is what was needed, and to begin her life anew.

"My life did not really begin," says Tom Wingo, "until I summoned the power to forgive my father." Is it too much to suggest that Pat Conroy has written a comparable parable to the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son? Perhaps that is pushing too far, and yet I would not want to dismiss too readily the possibility; for what Tom Wingo came to understand in the novel about his relationship with Henry Wingo, his father, is not that far afield from the relationship Scripture speaks of when it refers to God as "our Father." Until Tom Wingo came to the point of accepting his father—for all of the father's faults, real or perceived; came to read in his father's eyes a love which his hands had so often seemed to deny; until Tom Wingo came to understand his father was trying, with all the resources that his own inadequate father had passed along to him; and until Tom Wingo came to know that his father truly and deeply loved him even when it might not have been apparent; until Tom Wingo came to the point that he could forgive his father for such times, Tom Wingo's life could not really begin. Now, I don't know, but I suspect something like that is true in the life of faith, because I can tell you in every minister's memory, as in every therapist's file, the stories are legion of those whose lives have been halted—stymied—and sometimes virtually destroyed because of something they perceived God had done or not done.

Let me leave you with these poignant words by Fred Buechner:

All sons, like all daughters, are prodigals if they are smart. Assuming the old man doesn't run out on them first, they will run out on him if they are to survive, and if he is smart, he won't put up too much of a fuss. A wise father sees all this coming, and maybe that is why he keeps his distance from the start. He must survive, too. Whether they ever find their way home again, no one can say for sure, but it is the risk they must take if they are ever to find their way at all. Even as the father lays down the law, he knows that someday his children will break it, as they need to break it if they are ever to find something better than law to replace it. Until and unless that happens, there's no telling the scrapes they will get into trying to lose him and find themselves. Terrible blunders will be made, disappointments and failures, hurts, and losses of every kind. And they will keep making them ever after they've found themselves, too, of course, because growing up is a process that goes on and on. ⁴

Every hard knock that they ever get knocks the father even harder still, if that is possible, and if and when they finally come through more or less in one piece at the end, there is maybe no rejoicing greater than his in all creation. It has become so commonplace to speak of God as “our Father,” says Buechner, that we forget what an extraordinary metaphor it once was.

Has it ever occurred to you, as it occurred to me, in thinking about this sermon, what a great psychologist God would have made had He not gone into theology? As a matter of fact, John Calvin—three hundred years before Freud—in the first chapter of his classic *Institutes* observed that the more we learn about God, the more we learn about ourselves. And the more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn about God. So, here in the text once again, the Scriptures speak of the preciousness of relationships both human and divine, and of that crucial need within us all to forgive and to allow ourselves to be forgiven, lest our life never really begin.

Notes

¹ (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 282.

² Ibid.

³ *Act One: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1959), 24-25.

⁴ *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 52.