

## Forgiven

The Rev. Este Gardner Cantor

Joshua 5:9-12, 2 Cor. 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Holy Trinity/Good Shepherd

March 14, 2010

I knew the beautiful story of the Prodigal son as a small child even before my mother brought me to the Episcopal Church at eight years old, because it appears in the children's classic, "Heidi." As I was reading this book—which I did again and again—I was in a problematic relationship with my older brother, who made my life hell by not only beating me black and blue, but also frequently surprising me with his friends in tow when I was dressing or undressing.

He turned out, later in life, to be something of a creative genius. But as a child he used that genius to think up activities which, if the Americans did them to the Iraqis today would probably be termed as torture.

To be fair, ours was a chaotic and confusing family environment and my brother was taking out his fears and anger on me, which did not make it feel any better. I began a life-long habit of hatred toward my brother, holding him in eternal unforgiveness.

I don't have that much trouble believing that God loves and forgives me unconditionally, as is the point of our story today. But the point is also, I think, that we should see the forgiving father as a model for our own behavior. Jesus tells us elsewhere, in answer to Peter's question that we should forgive our brother 77 times. I was not willing to forgive my brother once. For me, this is was not an easy chore. Even Jesus, I told myself, did not apparently really forgive those who crucified him. But he asked God to forgive them, which is a pretty good start.

As my brother and I grew up, and passed through teenhood, we both had our prodigal phase of enthusiastically squandering our property. This was the sixties and it was not only easy,

but almost required to do so. But as we entered young adulthood, to my alarm, my brother, for all his past sins began to turn into a very successful and happy man. Apparently God's forgiveness was kicking in just fine, with or without my own. My brother worked his way up from being a gopher in a small film company to producing and directing his own films. I made a point of not watching any of them, even when he was nominated for an academy award for one of his documentaries. I got rid of my television so I wouldn't see any of them accidentally. It got harder to avoid news of these films though, as they began to be advertised on posters in the city.

Finally, at the urging of a therapist I wrote my brother a letter. I detailed all his abuses and told him how they had damaged my life. He called me immediately. He apologized profusely and said he loved me. He told me about some horrors he had been subjected to that I did not know about. He asked me to forgive him. I don't know what I thought the end result of my letter was supposed to be, but as far as I was concerned, it certainly was not forgiveness of my brother.

A few years later I visited my father, but although he lives 5 minutes away, I did not visit my brother. I told my father not to mention my visit to my brother, but that was like telling Pavarotti not to sing. When my brother found out I had come to see my father but not him, he was very hurt. He called me right away and tried to find out why I had not come to visit, but I wouldn't talk about it.

Finally, as I progressed through Holy Orders, my spiritual director pointed out that my holding my brother in unforgiveness was definitely hurting me more than it was him. What should I do? I asked him. The awful prescription was to begin to forgive my brother. I literally did not even know how to start. "Pray for him," my spiritual director said. This was hard. The best I could do initially was to say, "OK, God, I am praying for my [expletive deleted] brother"? But as the weeks went on it became easier, and something funny happened. I began to remember all the good things my brother had done for me. And that at times he had to be my mother and my father in that dysfunctional family. I remembered a time when I performed in my Junior High school variety show. Neither my mother nor my father came, but my 16 year old

brother did. And he later confronted my mother, telling her she should have gone. “Give me a break!” was her very maternal reply. I remembered that he had come out to San Francisco in 1969 to come and get me, urging me to go back to college, and urging my parents to pay for it. I began to consider forgiving him.

“OK,” I said to my spiritual director, “What is the next step?”

“Show your brother loving hospitality.” He said. Even harder. I called my brother, and as I spoke to him I realized it was the first time since we were children that I addressed him without resentment or hostility. I confessed that I had never watched his films, but that I would love to do so. How could I get copies? He told me to just wait and watch the mail, and in a few days I got a big custom-made load of his films. (I confess I still haven’t watched all of them.) He called to see if I got them and how I liked them. I began to realize that it was easier to forgive my brother for all his abuses than it was to forgive him for being so successful. This started to feel like my problem.

When I visited my brother he showed me remarkable loving hospitality. We began to relate as equals, not longer as big brother and little sister. A number of his films have been about religion, and he took an interest in my vocation. The last time I heard from him was on Friday when he e-mailed me a clip from a recent documentary he made about a Catholic nun, wanting to know what I thought. The film was so beautiful that my first instinct was envy. Then I remembered that I was no longer his little sister, and that he had sent this to me to get my approval.

Forgiving my brother, no longer holding him in unforgiveness, has been one of the biggest changes of my life. It has been such a great change that I could almost say that I was dead and am alive again, was lost and am found. And I am reminded of the beautiful words of Paul that we heard today. About what happens when we even begin to follow Jesus’ teachings—about forgiving your brother and things like that.

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; see—all things have become new!” All this is through God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Amen.