

September 14, 2014

“Forgiveness, Respect and Understanding”

Sermon by Roy G. Pollina+

You are made in the image and likeness of God. God loves you unconditionally and eternally. You are the pinnacle of God’s creation and so God gives to you unending love and respect.

If you want to understand today’s Gospel, you have to keep those facts in mind. To further help you understand today’s Gospel, I will tell you about my friend, David.

David and I met in college. Two more unlikely friends you have never met. David was everything I was not; he had blonde hair, blue eyes, and was rich. David’s father was a successful and wealthy OB-GYN. I was Roy, the barber’s son. What we found we had in common that first year of college is that we both spent previous summers working for the Public Works Department in our respective towns. There is nothing more exciting for a couple of 19-year-olds, than to drive around their town in a dump truck. David and I swapped stories about the heavy equipment our misguided cities entrust to us. There was a difference in David’s Public Work experience and mine. While I was working during the summer to earn money for college, David was earning money to buy a car. David drove a late model Volvo. Since freshmen were not allowed to have cars on campus, David stored his car off campus so he would have access to it. He was one of the few freshmen that actually had a car. One day I remarked to David that his city’s Public Works Department paid a lot better than my town’s Public Works Department since he saved enough money to buy a Volvo. David looked at me like I had just slapped him. “No, my father bought that Volvo for me,” he said. “I thought you worked last summer to buy the car,” I remarked. “I did,” David said, “but, when I told my dad I’d saved enough to buy the car that I wanted, my dad bought the Volvo for me, instead. He said it was a much better car than I would ever afford by working at Public Works.” What David said next has always haunted me.

David, in real emotional pain, told me, “You know, Roy, self-respect is really hard to come by when your father is rich.”

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In today’s Gospel, Peter goes to Jesus and asked Jesus a question about forgiveness. The numbers used in the question and answer “As many as seven times,” “no, not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven times,” The numbers used are metaphorical. Peter’s question to Jesus is simply” “Is there a limit to forgiveness?” Jesus gives a short answer and then continues with a nuanced longer answer. Jesus’ short answer is “No, there is no limit to forgiveness.” Then, Jesus proceeds to tell a parable that, at first, seems to contradict what he just said.

In the parable we have the story of a slave that appears before his King two times. The first time, the king forgives the slave an enormous debt, actually a ridiculously large amount; it was billions of dollars. The way things were calculated in their time, it was 160,000 years of wages. The second time this man appears before the king, the king does not offer forgiveness and hands him over to the torturers until the debt is paid. Yet, this is the parable that Jesus tells as the nuanced explanation of unlimited forgiveness. We are well within our rights to ask, “What is going on here?”

This brings me back to my friend, David. David’s sorrow was not that his father did not love him. There was plenty of circumstantial evidence that David was loved by his father who provided for him food, clothing, shelter, education and, as we heard, bought David a pretty nice car. I am not sure how a father proves that he loves his child but there seems to be abundant indications that David’s father loved him. No, David’s sorrow was not that his father did

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not love him. David’s anguish is that his father did not respect him or his efforts. Rather than admire his son for his achievement of working and saving all summer to buy a car, David’s father undermined his accomplishment by buying a car for him. David had a nicer car, but David wanted respect.

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The key to understanding Jesus’ parable about forgiveness is the respect God bestows upon us. When God declared to the company of heaven that he would create humankind in His image and likeness, I always imagined that there was a gasp of astonishment. The Creator formed a creature that would have a share in knowledge and free will, the capacity to love or to be unloving; the capacity to forgive or reject forgiveness. It was only after creating the first human beings that God declared his good creation, very good.

In Jesus’ parable, the king, who showed mercy without limit is astonished and angered by his slave’s lack of mercy. “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” the king asks. The enormous respect that the king showed to his slave in forgiving him and expecting that forgiveness to live in the forgiven slave has proven fruitless. The slave is handed over to the torturers until the debt is paid *not* because the king is exhausted of forgiveness but because the slave has made the decision not to nurture forgiveness in his life. When given the chance to forgive a small debt, the slave refused to allow forgiveness a space in his life. It is an absurd misuse of the slave’s free will not to forgive his fellow slave. Still, absurd or not, the king does not disrespect that decision or the slave who made it. Jesus ends his parable with the warning. “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if

you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

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Every time we say the Lord’s Prayer we ask, “Our Father” to “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” To a huge extent, God allows us to participate in our own redemption. God has said to us that all the forgiveness we will ever need is available to us. But understand, forgiveness must be nurtured and used by us or it is of no use to us. Regardless of what you may have done or the enormity of your fault, God will forgive you because God loves You! Whether God’s forgiveness will ultimately result in your eternal redemption is pretty much up to you and your willingness to forgive in return because God respects you.

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Amen