

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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First Sunday in Lent

25 February 2007

Psalm 103:1-18

Luke 15:11-24

Sing:

There once was a man who had two sons, and one of them was tired of staying home.
So he told his father on the very next morn, "Give me what I need and I'll be gone."
I need two frozen dinners, a bag full of coins, my soft sleeping bedroll and my bike.
So his father got it ready and kissed him goodbye.
And he watched as he started down the road.

And waiting is half of his story, and waiting is how he must be.
He can't help it, our God is a parent. And waiting is how he must be.

The boy had a good time for a week or two, and life on the road was looking good.
The money went out easy and the friends rolled by, the wind kept his bike on the move.
Each night he lay under stars and sky, happy in his bedroll he was warm.
"This is the life," he told himself.
But his father drank his coffee at the door.
And waiting is half...

The weeks went by and the nights grew cold; the bike and the boy were breaking down.
The money went out easy and the jobs were few; he'd kissed all the girls and made them cry.
He told himself in the snow one night, "Home is where I ought to be,"
He rehearsed himself as he started home.
But his father saw him coming and he ran.

A homecoming dance on the ceiling, across his great mind he goes reeling.
His son in his arms and the fiddle plays on, and dancing is how he must be!
(by Joe Wise)

It's striking to me how often we make wise cracks or flippant comments about the ways of the world and the ways of God, and then follow it up with another comment about whether or not lightning is about to strike. Will God zap us for that one? How much trouble are we in with the Big Guy upstairs? And then there's the all too popular feeling, sometimes on the tip of our tongue, sometimes buried deep under more acceptable rhetoric, that the bad things that happen to us good people really are punishments from God. If only we'd done that differently, if only we'd handled that better, if only we'd been kinder, gentler, more understanding, more patient, more tolerant, more present... then maybe none of this would be happening to us. And then of course, there's the end of the world predictors that threaten and warn that any day now we'll have to give an accounting of ourselves to God. Or maybe more accurately, they (and sometimes we) believe that God already has the accounting; it will be up to us to see if we can explain it away with

enough finesse that God will be convinced and impressed. Which is a pretty scary proposition, because most of us don't expect God to be snowed as easily as the gullible twit we just sold that Arizona beachfront property to.

How do you reconcile those images of an angry, vengeful God with the one in the song, the notion of a God who watches longingly as we wander off in neglect and selfish abandon, and who waits patiently for us to come to ourselves and turn back toward home? A God who drinks coffee at the door, staring at the road, watching for some speck to appear on the distant horizon, some inkling that maybe, just maybe we're going to make our way back home? A God who wants nothing more than to catch us up in her arms and spin us around for the thrill of having us home again? Which of those notions of God is more real and true for you? And I don't just mean the polite and proper words you utter because you want to believe them, and you want others to think you believe them. In your heart of hearts, when no one else is looking or listening, do you experience God as mad enough at you to spit nails and slap you up side the head with a 2x4 – or so deeply in love with you that there will always be an arm to fall back on, a shoulder to lean against, an understanding look to encourage you, a loving nudge to get you going, a place you can turn when there's nowhere else to turn?

The Bible is full of a wide variety of notions and understandings of God and how God works in the world, and I need to be honest enough to admit that both of the concepts that I've just named can be found there: an angry, vengeful, fed up God as well as an eternally loving, gracious, forgiving and welcoming God. I've often heard people try to separate the Old Testament God from the New – the first as angry, and latter as loving. Personally, I think that's way too simplistic, and that in truth, both images can be found in both testaments. And in fact, as I read the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, there are consistent expressions of God as loving and gracious, or as the Psalm we heard this morning says, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. As the heavens are high about the earth, so great is God's steadfast love for us; as far as East Africa is from Western Alaska, so far away does God fling our sin and stain and shortcomings and failings. As a parent has compassion for his or her children, so does God have compassion for God's beloved children. God watches heartbroken as we head off in the opposite direction than God would have us walk, and God sits and waits, lovingly, longingly for us to turn around and come back home.

I don't for a minute want to make God out to be a soft and squishy anything goes sort of God. God does have expectations and wishes for how we live – in relationship to God and to each other. But God also has a completely unique and unprecedented ability to be patient and tolerant and most of all forgiving. God has given us commandments and the teachings of the prophets because God has very high hopes and expectations for how we will live and how we will treat each other and God's gift of creation. But in the midst of all of that is the amazing and absolutely consistent message that there is nothing that God will not do for us, no place that God will not go to find us, no wound that God will not heal and no sin that God will not forgive. The question is whether or not, in our heart of hearts, we believe it, can accept it for ourselves, and are willing to extend the favor to others.

Sometime a couple of months ago in a staff meeting, Lucy and Sue and I agreed that it would be really good to spend the season of Lent focusing on the notion of forgiveness. I don't think I can

tell you exactly how we got there, but it seems to me that it comes from a couple of different convictions. One is the sense that a whole lot of people carry around a whole lot of shame and guilt about who they are and what they've done. If the truth be told, a whole lot of us are very hard on ourselves, feel unacceptable at our core, and carry with us a whole truck load of accumulated baggage as to how we have failed and fallen short. And we don't reserve the condemning scowl just for ourselves. As individuals, and as a culture, it seems to me that far too often we've lost much of a sense of how to forgive others. In the world of both major and minor offenses, we are amazing scorekeepers. Whether its childhood abuse or that someone looked at us wrong on an especially bad and overly sensitive day, many of us haul around behind us angers and resentments and grudges that bog us down and burden our lives, as well as the lives of those that we refuse to forgive. And yet, having said that, I want desperately to be careful to not be casual and dismissive where abuse and oppression and hatred and injustice are concerned. The last thing I ever want to be accused of is being one of those pastors who tells a woman to go home and be a good obedient wife and to forgive her husband for the beating she took last night, or tell a child to honor his mother, even if she does slap him for little or no reason.

So what does forgiveness mean? When should we and when shouldn't we? Are there limits on what we should put up with? Are there behaviors or people who simply can't be or shouldn't be forgiven? Are there steps that people need to take before we forgive them? Are there steps we can take to help us get to feeling forgiven or being able to forgive others? I want to be careful how many and what questions I ask, because I don't want you to think that Lucy and I are promising to answer them all. But I do want to say that we've decided that it makes sense to spend the season reflecting on forgiveness. What it is, what God calls us to, what God offers us in grace, and how we can weave more and more of it into our lives. As I wrestled with where to begin, I kept coming back to the basic truth that God forgives. I think that's where it all starts. Forgiveness is at heart who God is and how God moves among us. If we can start with some sense of acknowledging that truth, maybe we can move forward, both with accepting that grace into our own lives, and by extending some portion of it to others.

You may have heard me talk about a time when I was in seminary that I lived through what I later came to call a 9-month war with God. It began with a summer's experience of a whole host of injustices and painful encounters. I watched a woman go through a psychotic break because of the legal system and the rules and regulations it imposed on her. I turned away from a strong attraction to a fellow ministry student because he was Catholic and his church said he had to choose between me and his calling. When I got back to school, I witnessed a woman being assaulted and found it impossible to enter a dark room for months afterward. I raged and railed at God. And when I finally wore out, I just wandered around wearily distant and quietly apathetic. Eventually, I began to long for it to be over, but I didn't know how to find my way back home. I remember singing the Faure Requiem and being convinced it was my dead soul I was praying over. I couldn't imagine what I needed to do to get right with God. Finally, sometime in the night between Saturday and Easter morning, while I took my place at a prayer vigil, probably about 3 o'clock in the morning, I tried to meditate and image myself in the apple orchard of the farm where I grew up. In my mind's eye, as I got there, I found Jesus waiting for me. I wondered how to approach him, but before I could say or do anything, he simply came to me and embraced me, welcoming me home. I didn't need to do anything to make it all right. I simply needed to come home.

Sing: A homecoming dance on the ceiling, across his great mind he goes reeling.
His son in his arms and the fiddle plays on, and dancing is how he must be!

During the Sundays of this series, we're going to include a moment for silent reflection and prayer at the end of the sermon. A moment for you to reflect on whatever aspect of forgiveness you feel inclined to reflect on: your need to accept it, your need to offer it to someone else, your need to stop some form of behavior that is hurtful or sinful in order that you might be embraced and forgiven. A moment for you and God to be together in silence and prayer.