

*On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand*  
**Week 5 Forgiveness**

Luke 7:36-50 February 4, 2018

Pastor Roger Barkley Congregational Church of Northridge

Jameel McGee found himself working beside a 33-year old white guy who was his new supervisor at the Café Mosaic, a restaurant that provides job training in food service, hospitality and catering.

A few of weeks earlier, Jameel had run into this man, Andrew Collins, at a big church outreach event called Hoops, Hip Hop and Hot Dogs.

That's when Jameel had stepped out of the crowd with his five-year-old son in tow.

Collins recalls that he shook his hand, but Jameel wouldn't let go.

Right away he knew this was not going to be a good run-in.

Jameel asked, "Do you remember me?"

Collins said he might, to which Jameel responded, "Then I want you to explain to my son why his dad hasn't been in his whole life."

Some years earlier, Andrew Collins had been a young, narcotics officer out to prove himself by racking up arrests along the tough streets of his precinct.

He was in the right town for a cop to prove his toughness:

Benton Harbor, Michigan is one of the most dangerous cities in the country, with a violent crime rate 4.5-times the national average.

On February 8, 2005, Collins had arrested Jameel McGee as he walked out of a store where he'd just bought birthday decorations for his son's first birthday party.

He didn't understand what was happening until the young officer said that he'd driven to the store in a car that contained a chip of crack cocaine in the front seat cup holder.

McGee had accepted a ride from some friends, but he'd ridden in the backseat and denied any knowledge of the crack - but what suspect doesn't try to lie their way out of an arrest?

Because he didn't like McGee's attitude, Collins falsely wrote the arrest report to place him in the driver's seat and thus responsible for the drugs, which resulted Jameel McGee getting a ten-year sentence in Federal prison.

But this wasn't the first time Collins had enhanced or falsified an arrest report.

It would later be revealed that he had unjustly incarcerated dozens of people.

McGee had been consumed with anger as he sat behind bars, isolated from his young son and the wife he adored, unable to be with his family after his brother was shot, and obsessed by the realization that with a felony record he would be unlikely to ever find a meaningful or lucrative career.

Benton Harbor was such a corrupt city that state officials eventually assumed control of the local government and indicted several officials for embezzlement.

This brought attention to the city police as well.

Before long, drugs were found under the desk of officer Collins, who was arrested for drug possession and a variety of charges related to falsification of arrest reports.

As a result, charges were dropped against fifty incarcerated people, including McGee, who had served four years of his ten-year sentence.

We've spent the past month walking through the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ, and today we look at the topic of "forgiveness", which is the cornerstone of Jesus's teaching.

Our Statement of Faith reads, "God promises to all who trust Him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace...."

In today's scripture, we find Jesus dining at the home of a well-regarded Pharisee named Simon.

Jesus had recently been making a bit of a name for himself, which may have been the reason for the invite to dine with the prominent people of the village.

In any case, dinner is served, and as was the fashion at the time, the men lounged around the table.

Suddenly a woman burst in – women were not allowed to share the table with men, so that was outrageous enough, but on top of that she was instantly recognized as a sinful woman.

Now, scripture does not say what made her sinful, and we have to be careful not to jump to the assumption so many do that she was a prostitute – as if prostitution is the only sin a woman might commit.

In their time, there was a long list of rules about how to live with purity that would be pleasing to God, but we've come to understand being right with God isn't about purity.

Righteousness is not about purity, and so sin is not about failing to strictly adhere to a list of holiness rules.

We've talked a lot about sin being broken relationship with God, with our higher self or with our community.

All sorts of unhealthy behaviors arise when I fall out of relationship with God, self or others, but the behaviors themselves are just pointers to that sin.

And since our destructive behaviors are pointers to our fragmented relationship with the Divine, simply promising “to do better next time” seldom works.

That in a nutshell was the insight of the Apostle Paul.

How many times have we told ourselves we'd not drink again, gossip again, run-up the credit card again, fight with our partner again ... or whatever ... only to fail again?

In the book *Bitten by a Camel* that some of us are reading, Kent Dobson says we can identify sin with ongoing questions: What are the ways of living that cause suffering? What are ways of living that disintegrate our God-given wholeness?

In any case, the woman is recognized by the locals as a sinner, so the Pharisee Simon thinks to himself, (Luke 7:39b) *“If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”*

Jesus instantly demonstrates that he is, indeed, a prophet because he knows Simon’s thoughts, which leads him to the parable of the moneylender.

Nine verses later he demonstrates that he is also more than a prophet when he forgives the woman’s sins.

Actually, it is likely that Jesus is restating the forgiveness that he’d previously granted in a meeting not recorded here . . . in other words, Jesus is reassuring her that her sins, indeed, have been forgiveness.

Sometimes forgiveness is hard to comprehend.

By the way, this section of Luke 7 is bracketed with the question of whether Jesus is a prophet.

It opens with John the Baptist prophesying that Jesus would be a prophet and more than a prophet.

John had been in the Jordan River offering baptism for the forgiveness of sins, at which the Pharisees (and we assume this might include Simon, himself) scoff and turn away from.

They’re pretty good at following the rules, so why do they have to be forgiven for anything?

Then the chapter concludes with Jesus asking Simon, as we heard Terri read a moment ago, who will be more grateful: the one whose fifty denarii of debt is forgiven, or the one whose debt of five hundred denarii is forgiven.

That would be about two months of wages versus a year-and-a-half of wages.

The answer is obvious: the larger debt.

The more we recognize the extent of grace in our life, the more grateful we become – and the more grateful we become, the more gracious and generous we become.

Luke 7:39 *“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”*

Jesus gets right in the self-righteous Simon’s face, more or less saying that he’s behaved like one who feels entitled, who extended no hospitality to the weary traveling teacher.

But the woman has recognized the magnitude of her transgressions and therefore the meaning and magnitude of forgiveness she has received, and because of that she has extended herself with graciousness, generosity and humility.

So, Simon’s understanding of righteousness caused him to pull back from the sinful woman, while Jesus’ alternative understanding of righteousness drew him to her with the offer of forgiveness and the blessing of peace.

At the same time, Simon’s sense of righteousness led to the irony that the hospitality he failed to offer in his own house was extended by the outsider, who is overcome with gratitude.

Forgiveness reconnects us to God and attunes us to the needs of people around us.

There is a message given from pulpits all over the West that we are all born so flawed that we are offensive to God.

In that teaching, we are born so stained by sin that we are a problem to God that needs to be fixed if God is to spend eternity with us.

Now that is not the teaching of the early church, nor is it the teaching in all of Christendom; the Eastern Orthodox tradition, for example, does not see things that way.

That concept of Original Sin actually began in the fifth century when St. Augustine puzzled over his natural tendency toward selfish behavior.

Many of us have labored under the insidious belief that we are not worthy, that we are intrinsically flawed, and so have lived with a deep shame that some churches have reinforced.

For example, maybe you came from a church that ostracized people who were divorced – as if going through a divorce is not difficult enough.

The Bible emphasizes the Original Blessing God sees you as.

You are unique – God created you out of love, and God never created anyone else like you because God loves variety.

Did you know that there are as many as 2.1-million species of beetles?

It's like God created a million species of beetles – and I don't even know why we need a million species of beetles – but then said, "I'm having so much fun with these little guys that I'll paint an orange dots on this one to create another species, and yellow wings on this one and create yet another species."

God delights in diversity, and God does that with people, too.

He says, "I'll create this one shy, this one plump, this one gay, this one with mechanical gifts, this one with an extra dose of emotions."

So, there's no intrinsic shame in you ... God joyfully created you to be who you are.

*Good and very good*, is what God called humanity.

But, yes, we get ourselves into a mess when we disconnect from God.

That's what Adam and Eve did when they tried to become like God rather than be the creatures they were designed to be.

So, we have some wonderful traits and accomplishments, and some bad and destructive ones.

We are natural sinners and natural saints.

We fall into destructive patterns, and God offers a way out.

We're messy, so we depend on the forgiveness of God and others.

We create some damage or are damaged in our relationships, and through the grace of Christ, we are given guidance and courage to reestablish relationship.

That's forgiveness.

Forgiveness is giving up all hope for a perfect yesterday so I can move on.

Anyway, even if you did something in your past that was really bad, you are so much more than the worse thing you've ever done – and God wants to help you get back on track.

You may have some things that are sources of shame:

Maybe you didn't live up to your parents' expectations; your child is doing drugs; you've struggling with an addiction; you are too fat; too skinny, getting old and forgetful, in debt, fighting with your partner behind closed doors.

Well, welcome to the human race ... the human race God loves so much.

And as we realize that God isn't looking down from afar disgusted with us; we can receive God's never-ending offer of grace that is always seeking to lift us out of our self-imposed shame.

Forgiveness gives you back yourself.

So, Jameel found himself with Andrew Collins, this time standing at a stainless-steel table in the kitchen of the Mosaic Café which provides training in the food and hospitality industries.

Jameel had badly injured his hand on a construction job and so needed to learn a new career, and as fate would have it, Andrew Collins was assigned to be his mentor by someone who did not know their histories.

As the men awkwardly got to know each other, Jameel would learn that after Collins' arrest for drugs and corruption, he had contemplated suicide.

His wife pushed him into seeing a local pastor who, himself, had been a policeman.

After hearing Andrew's long confession of crimes, he asked about how he was with Jesus.

Andrew simply cried and said he didn't deserve forgiveness or salvation.

But, ours is a God of second chances.

As Andrew Collins was preparing himself for prison, he also was preparing for a fresh start with Christ.

First, he had to own up to what he had done.

He later said, "I don't remember the first instance of doing something wrong, but I remember thinking of it as bending the rules instead of breaking the rules."

We can rationalize all sorts of behavior ... but rationalize often means "rational lies".

It sets a pattern in motion that can sweep us along like a dangerous tide can pull you into deep and dangerous waters.

Collins continues, "... By the end of my career, I was stealing money from citizens, I was stealing money from the city of Benton Harbor, I was lying on search warrants and on reports — things that I would have thought I never would have done four years earlier when I first became a police officer."

We again see the potential power of the introspective questions that Kent Dobson raised: What are the ways of living that cause suffering? What are ways of living that disintegrate our God-given wholeness?

As the wrongly-accused Jameel McGee sat in prison, he faced those same questions.

He was being eaten alive by obsessing on the unfairness of what had been done to him.

It was unjust, racist, unfair, cruel ... but there he was all the same.

But while still behind bars he began reading the Bible where he found words of hope springing from forgiveness.

Jameel realized that unless something changed that he would remain a prisoner even after his release from jail – a prisoner of his bitterness and anger.

So, he threw himself into the teachings of Jesus and got active in the prison church (running their sound system).

After Jameel unexpectedly showed up as his trainee at the Mosaic Café, Andrew couldn't stop apologizing for what he'd done.

Eventually Jameel told him to stop ... the past was past, he'd forgiven him and now they had to move on.

As part of his parole agreement, Andrew had to teach a class of ethics at the police academy to share how he'd tumbled down the slippery slope of hedging on the truth.

But the biggest lesson for both Jameel and Andrew was the life-changing presence of Christ.

This they shared with each other, and then they began searching for ways to share the message with others.

Soon the two partnered up to carry their message of reconciliation and forgiveness to local churches and then to the community.

Andrew Collins had so much to be forgiven for that his whole life is now inspired by grace.

Forgiveness did not remove consequences – he had to serve time in prison and repay tens of thousands of dollars of money he'd stolen.

But forgiveness set him free from his entire life being defined by his worst behavior.

That is the message of his ministry, for now the former cop is a pastor.

And his former prisoner is his partner in proclaiming the grace of Jesus Christ.

*John 8:34-36 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*

In today's passage from Luke 7, the price of the sinful woman's life was her ostracization from her community, including the religious institutions that had the resources to restore her.

Instead, those institutions did the most to ostracize her.

What she needed most was a community of forgiveness ... a community of faith that could say, "No matter who you are, or where you have been on your life's journey, you are welcome here."