

Practicing Lent Receiving Forgiveness

Ruth Haley Barton

“While the truth that we cannot escape God’s all-seeing eye may weigh us down at times, it is finally the only remedy for our uneasiness... Only under God’s steady gaze of love are we able to find the healing and restoration we so desperately need.”

Marjorie Thompson, *Soulfeast*

Confession is good for the soul because it opens us to the extraordinary experience of being forgiven. All of the lectionary passages for this week affirm the joy of forgiveness and the excitement of new beginnings as part of our Lenten journey.

The Gospel reading, in particular (Luke 15:11-32), records Jesus’ powerful parable in which the prodigal son returns home radically humbled, seeking forgiveness, and finds himself in the middle of a party—not a birthday party or a wedding party or a retirement party but a forgiveness party! He discovered what we all have the opportunity to discover—that while the “godly grief that leads to repentance” is real, confession does not ultimately lead us to shame or obsession with our sin; rather it leads to the experience of cleansing and release. *You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free*, Jesus says.

A Story of Forgiveness

One beautiful experience of the power of forgiveness I was privileged to be a part of involved our oldest daughter, Charity, when she was just fifteen years old.¹ My husband and I had been away for the evening celebrating a friend’s birthday and when we came home, things just didn’t feel right in the house. The kitchen floor and counters looked clean but they were a bit sticky, there was trash in the trash cans from food items

that we don't use, and Charity was acting a bit strange. We probed but she kept assuring us that everything was fine.

The next day I continued to feel disturbed, certain something had gone on in our house while we were gone. I told Charity that if she didn't tell us what had happened, I would have to call the police because I felt that someone had been in our house. At that point she admitted there had been people in the house and that there had been some drinking, but the details were very fuzzy and changed with each telling. She was clearly not telling us the whole story.

This happened on a Friday night. By Sunday, we were able to piece together who had been there, but we still were not getting to the truth. I told her I was going to call the parents of each young person who was there, tell them that there had been a drinking party at our house and that in order to get to the bottom of it, we would like them to come to our house with their young person the following evening so we could talk about it. Charity was very apprehensive as she had no idea what to expect. We assured her that our intent was to be very loving, but we felt we had a right to know what had gone on in our house, each of the parents had a right to know what their kids were up to, and the young people needed a chance to take responsibility for their actions. In addition, we as parents needed a chance to say that we loved them too much to let this kind of thing go on without dealing with it.

Coming Clean

By the time Monday evening came, Charity had told us the whole truth and one of the neighbors had let us know he'd had to drive one young man home because he was too drunk to drive. But we still felt that the parents needed to be informed, and the young

people needed to have the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions. So we continued with our plans for the meeting. To our surprise, all the parents came (not just one but both parents!) along with their children; about thirty of us gathered in our living room to let the truth be told.

With no place to hide, each young person had to take responsibility for their part of what happened. Charity had invited a few close friends over while we weren't there (which she was not allowed to do) and when other teens (including some upperclassmen who could drive) found out there were no parents at home, they came over with liquor and she let them in. One young man confessed that he had a bottle of vodka in his backpack that he had taken from the home of his girlfriend's grandparents. Another confessed to taking his mother's car out of the garage without her knowledge to go buy beer. Another confessed to having had so much to drink that he couldn't stop vomiting (thus, the sticky counters). The young man whom our neighbors had to drive home confessed that he had been too drunk to drive. It was a shocking and sobering evening.

The Power of Forgiveness

Once the whole story got told to everyone's satisfaction and the parents got to ask all their questions, Charity made her own confession. Even though she could have fudged a bit and blamed it on those who brought the liquor, she took full responsibility for her own actions. With tears and brokenness she confessed to her friends and their parents, "The fact that this happened is my fault. If I had not had people over when I wasn't suppose to, this would not have happened. If I had not opened the door and let everyone in, this would not have happened. If I had called someone to help, this would not have happened. I am sorry. The thing that hurts me most is the thought that you might

not trust me any more. I hope you can forgive me and that you will trust me again to be a good friend to your son or daughter.” By this time almost everyone was crying.

When it was over, there were hugs all around and deep a sense of gratitude for what had taken place. The young people were grateful for the love that had been shown to them (strange as it may seem) and the parents were grateful someone had cared enough to provide a way for them to know what was happening in their children’s lives. Many of the parents hugged Charity and told her how much they loved her and that they did forgive her.

After everyone had left, we sat quietly together reflecting on the evening and Charity made a statement I will never forget. Her eyes were shining with a brightness and a peace I had never seen in her before and she said, “I don’t care what happens to me now because now I know am forgiven.”

Confession. Forgiveness. New Beginnings. This is the best stuff of Lent.
Don’t miss it.

¹ Charity has given her permission for me to share this.

For a listing of Lenten Lectionary Readings, go to www.thetransformingcenter.org/pdf/lectlent10.pdf

For a listing of recommended Lenten Resources, go to www.thetransformingcenter.org/pdf/lentres09.pdf

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