

# Forgiveness

(c) The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

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Next week, we will really begin to feel like it's Christmas. Our church is already beginning to look like Christmas, decorated with evergreens and winter sparkle. But as we prepare for Christmas, we find ourselves in the Christian season of Advent, a season of watchful waiting. We are waiting for the birth of the holy child, the birth of something new into the world, the promise that all our old problems are not the end of the story.

Cynical experience tells us that there is nothing new under the sun, that humanity will continue to encounter the same old troubles, that hope is an illusion. But we have known, too, the delight of holding a newborn infant and marveling at exactly how new and miraculous that baby is. We wonder what promises this child might bring to the world. We wonder what new discovery she will make, what new peace he will bring, what new love they will show humanity. The newness and promise breaks through our cynicism. Our hope for a better world is awakened. Advent is a season of watchful waiting, not just for one special child, but for the possible world to come.

It's why Advent hymns remind us of that world, remind us of the promise of our Universalist theology that says that all people will be gathered together in that coming world of peace and harmony. Jesus called it the "kingdom of God"; I like to think that in that world there are no rulers and ruled. I call it the "peaceable way." In the world to come, we will walk together as brothers and sisters in peace. In the world to come, there will be no wrongdoing and no harm done. Advent is a season of imagining and hoping for that world to come.

Well, that's nice, dreaming about the world to come; but we live here in this world, with its practicalities and problems. We can't spend all our time cooing over new babies and fantasizing about a perfect future. We need advice for the here-and-now. Yet humanity's spiritual masters are always pointing us to look beyond the here-and-now to the what-could-be. Although we can imagine the world to come, we live in this world, which is why the teachings of our spiritual masters so often don't make sense. Take the story of the Prodigal Son.

This parable appears in Luke's gospel as the culmination of stories about things that are lost and then are found. Jesus has been talking with tax collectors and sinners, fellow Jews, ordinary people trying to make a living even if it means breaking some religious laws. Some Jewish leaders of the time, called Pharisees, were resisting the Roman empire by following those laws very closely, and they complained about Jesus' friendliness with these sinners ("Pharisees"). "He even eats with them!" they said. It's as though the Pharisees were saying, "In this world, we have to live by some rules! You can't just ignore all laws! There's a way things have to be!"

In response, Jesus tells the story of precious things lost and found: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. The lost sheep which is one in a hundred; the lost coin which is one in ten; the lost son which is both one of two and one, irreplaceable, all on his own. Jesus is saying, does there not come a time when we do not pay attention to the law? Does there not come a time when our hearts call us beyond the rules to respond to love? There are times, this spiritual teacher is saying, when the rules of this world don't apply, and we must live by the calling of the next.

One of the challenges of the story of the Prodigal Son is that it is easy for us to side with the older brother. The older brother's voice of warning and complaint is the voice of this-world concerns. The older brother's plea is so understandable: "I have worked for you all these years,

I have never disobeyed you, and you've never thrown me a party like you're throwing him. He doesn't love you; he's only going to take more of your money and break your heart again."

We can stand with the older brother and see the future of this story, a future Jesus doesn't touch on at all. The profligate younger son returns home, takes up his work at the farm, and for a while everything will be fine. But those compulsions and demons are still with him, and how long is it before he begins to feel the lure of his old life? Dissolute living has a beautiful siren song, and it takes discipline and compassion and hard work to stay away from it. How long will it be before the younger son is asking his father to bail him out again? How long will it be before he once more breaks his father's heart? The older brother can imagine a very real future, and he does not want to be hurt again.

The father is the voice of the world to come. When the father welcomes his young, wayward son into his arms, he says, "You were dead, and now you are alive again; you were lost, and now you are found." This is a world of resurrection: from the father's point of view, the return of his son is the return from the dead. Everything is different now. Forgiveness is not only possible, it's the way of the world to come. When the older brother complains, the father repeats himself: "This brother of yours was dead and now he is alive; he was lost and now he is found." The older brother is still living in the mundane world; the father is living in the next world.

If only the older brother could see the situation as the father does, he would find himself in that next world, too. This is why the story is so hard. This is why we feel like we are being called to forgiveness in a situation that doesn't warrant it. The Prodigal Son does not deserve forgiveness in this world, but in God's peaceable way, there is nothing but welcome and love. The dream of the next world keeps the possibility of hope in this one alive. Every year could be the year that a baby is born who will save humankind. Every protest and call for justice could be the one that tips us over toward the peaceable way of justice and mercy.

This week, when I think of the world to come, when I think of forgiveness, I think of the legacy of racism that our country struggles with day in and day out. There have been protests in the cities of our country against the killing of African American men and boys by white police. The details differ from instance to instance, but the pattern reminds us too much of patterns of racism from our country's past.

The most recent injustice, the failure of a grand jury to indict an officer who killed Eric Garner on Staten Island this summer, has raised outcry from both the political right and the political left. Do we not live in a country where people are free to walk the streets? Do we not live in a country where a man can refuse a police search? Do we not live in a country of laws? It feels now like some of us live in that country and some of us do not. It feels like those of our brothers and sisters who have dark skin, or are poor, or live in the inner city are more likely to end up on the wrong side of an interaction with authority gone wrong. When children are shot by police for playing in a park, when the police don't even slow down or try to find out what's going on, it feels like our country of laws and fairness is very far away. We feel a long, long distance from the peaceable way then. We feel like all of us, as a nation, are in need of forgiveness.

I can tell you my own story. I'll share one of my foibles with you: I drive kind of fast. Not so much on the city streets but definitely on the highway and on New England country roads. So sometimes I get pulled over. I got pulled over once in Waterville Valley, New Hampshire for making an illegal u-turn right in front of the police. Of course as a teenager I loitered in parks after dark with my friends and hung out at Denny's without buying much of anything and in general did things that someone in authority could have stopped me from doing.

But in all the times I have been pulled over, all the times I was somewhere I shouldn't have been, even that time when the u-turn was clearly illegal and the cop was right there, I have never been ticketed. Never. Once I was speeding and the cop came up behind me, lights on, but then pulled around me to pull over the SUV in front. I used to think this was my super-power--I've never even been a passenger in a car that received a ticket--but now I know it's probably the privilege of being white and middle class.

Once in college, speeding with my white girlfriends in the neighborhoods of suburban Detroit, long segregated by race and class, a cop pulled us over. "Where are you girls from?" he asked. We were from the mostly white, middle class suburbs we were driving through. "I'll let you go with a warning," he responded. I can't help but think the answer would have been different if we had been from the city, or if we had been black. Our privilege got us off the hook. This isn't my personal fault, but it feels more and more like I live in a system that isn't working right, that needs forgiveness. It feels more and more like the world would be better, would be just a little bit closer to the peaceable way, if I had to pay a ticket every once in a while, and my black brothers and sisters were left alone more of the time. This is what I think is driving people to protest in our cities, this desire that the world be better than it is for all people.

Our spiritual leaders call us to see the next world and try to make this one a little more like it. They call us to work for that better world, a world beyond racism and classism and violence. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of those leaders, and he called us to heed that vision his final speech in Memphis, in 1968. He called to mind the next world; he evoked the promised land. He said that he had been to the mountaintop, and that he knew that since there were threats against his life, he wouldn't get the land beyond with his people. He knew that. But he laid out the work to be done.

Continue to apply the force of African American activism and economic impact. Make sure the fight for racial equality also included a fight for economic equality. End the war in Vietnam. King had a vision of the promised land and he could see the path that would bring it a little bit closer. We are coming up on the fiftieth anniversary of the march on Selma this spring. We have made enormous strides as a country, but there is still a long way to go to bring the promised land closer. We can still see it, though, with Dr. King: we can still imagine a world of racial equality, where the police do not offend people's civil rights and everyone receives fair treatment under the law. We can see a world where no one suffers in poverty and all children have equal opportunities to thrive. During Advent we are reminded to hope and pray for the new day that will dawn on a new world, where all is love, and there is no division or heartbreak. We know that the path toward that world is the path of forgiveness and justice. We set our feet to walk that path, seeking out the peaceable way.

Please join me in the spirit of a [prayer that Martin Luther King offered](#) during a voting rights march in 1965 (101).

#### Sources

King, Jr., Martin Luther. "[Thou, Dear God](#)": *Prayers That Open Hearts and Spirits*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.

"Pharisees." [The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church](#). Ed. F. L. Cross. New York: Oxford UP. 1059.

#### Readings

Luke 15: 11-32

From "I See the Promised Land" by Martin Luther King, Jr.

