**Living Forgiveness**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**August 28, 2016**

Luke 11: 1-4 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This week marked the 28th anniversary of The United Church of Canada passing the Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality policy, now known as MMHS. (it is also the 28th anniversary for Brian and I’s covenanting – we dropped by the national meeting of General Council in Victoria as part of our honeymoon trip – we are such church geeks!) The MMHS stated that “all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, who profess their faith in Jesus Christ are welcome to be or become members of The United Church of Canada" and that "all members of the United Church are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry." It was a faithful yet challenging decision for the church at the time.

As we moved through the next years, I learned just how conservative, the congregation I grew up in was. Southminster United in Calgary was an average sized congregation with the average age of members being 65. Their minister was a sweet Irish man, Martin Lynas. Sweet at least until you heard him talk about homosexuality, which fortunately I only heard him speak about it once. I had moved away to train for and start my ministry so I was not present at the church during this time and never heard him preach a sermon on it. It was two years after the 1988 MMHS decision at the next general Council that I really learned how vehemently opposed the people of Southminster, the people I grew up with, were to homosexuals being ministers. I was at the General Council and the organization working against LGBT ministers, the Community of Concern, published a daily newsletter and distributed it. One day there was a little box in the newsletter, from Southminster stating that they would not support having an homosexual minister and encouraging General Council to reverse its’ previous decision. In the box was a list of people, all of whom I knew, some were close family friends, including my Godparents. I felt angry, hurt, rejected, betrayed. When I got home I wrote a letter to the congregation stating that I no longer wished to be associated with them and asked that I be removed from their lists. Now, long story short, this really upset my parents who were still active in the congregation and who were concerned about me writing off all the people that supported me in my faith and ministry. I backed off, realizing that I acted rashly, harshly, and without thinking through all the implications of my reaction. I still disassociated myself from the congregation in my mind, but was still connected with and through my parents. Brian and I, and eventually our two sons, always went to church there with my parents whenever we visited Calgary until it closed about 10 years ago. I remained connected, but not very forgiving.

Today’s passage talks about forgiveness and the importance of forgiving others at the same time we seek forgiveness. It can be hard to forgive others, especially if they have not acknowledged any responsibility for doing wrong or hurting you. There are times when forgiveness in these circumstances and situations is easier and more appropriate than others. It can be easier to forgive someone for an insult, or forgetting something important, than for to forgive someone for something like sexual assault or other forms of abuse. Jesus still calls us to find the grace to move toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

Prayer is a powerful thing and works in and through us in ways we cannot understand. At the end of this passage following the words of Jesus’ prayer, after telling a few parables about prayer, persistence and asking, Jesus, shares that God will give the Holy Spirit to anyone who comes to God in prayer. So as we pray, the Holy Spirit is an integral part of it. We receive the Holy Spirit in and through all our praying. If God always gives the Holy Spirit to those who pray, then even when a prayer goes “unanswered,” God has provided a deeper answer after all. The presence of the Spirit. This is not an easy truth. This is something to consider when things don’t go the way we had hoped or wanted when we are praying. Regardless of the circumstances, we are not alone for God is with us in the Holy Spirit and in all the love and support we experience around us. God is with us as we work toward reconciliation and forgiveness, opening our heart to grace.

As we consider prayer, we also consider what it means with a changing understanding of God. Many are shifting in their understanding of God being external to us, to God being with and in us. This can create some challenges when thinking about prayer. If we are not praying to a God up in the sky or heavens, then who or what are we praying to and how does prayer work? Robert Gnuse, of Process and Faith, describes it this way:

 *I believe that when we pray, we pray to the power of the divine that is within us. We pray for that divine force to actualize itself in our lives for actions and for healing. Thus, I believe that oft times when we pray for God to act, we may be praying for God to move us to accomplish what needs to be done. For me, prayer is where the interface between the human and the divine occurs, prayer is where we and God act together. Maybe we need to realize that when we pray to God for something, because we and God must work together.*

So when we pray, it is not just up to God to act, but for us to do what we can as well with God.

Forgiveness sometimes takes time and we grow into it. That, I’d say, is what happened in my story with Southminster and Martin Lynas. I realize now in looking back that continuing to go to Southminster, was an act of reconciliation, a move toward forgiveness. Martin was a gentle and kind man, and although he felt very strongly against homosexuality, he always treated me and Brian, once he was a part of my life, with love and respect. On one level I think he thought I was different, an exception from all those other gay people. But it is in getting to really know us that reconciliation truly happened. In 2008, at my fathers’ funeral he said to me:

“you know, I have watched you and Brian raise those boys, and I have deep respect for you both. Now I know I have said and done some things against homosexuality that I regret and I’m sorry.”

It was a profound shift and for me in that moment, forgiveness was complete. My reflections on this, is that we never know the impact that our presence can have on others, and that our presence is important, regardless of our situation or circumstances. Always know that Spirit is with us and working through us.

I am reflective of this for you folk in the Anglican Church as you move toward same sex marriage. There will be differences in the church and challenges. I invite you to be open to the stories of those who hold a different position than you, be present to them and walk with them. Listen respectfully to each other. Be open to new understandings and insights. Together we can find ways through our differences and the things that hurt us, confuse us, or upset us.

Yesterday morning, I read Richard Rohr’s daily reflection and he provided a contemplative prayer exercise that was very fitting to forgiveness. I share it with you now, inviting you to listen and take it in. You may not want to fully engage in it as the reflective work would take more time than I’ll give you and it is very personal, important and challenging work. I have copies of the meditation printed for you at the back if you wish to take one home.

First, identify a hurt or an offense in your life. Remember the feelings you first experienced with this hurt and feel them the way you first felt them. Notice how this shows up in your body. Paying attention to your body’s sensations keeps you from jumping into the mind and its dualistic games of good-guy/bad-guy, win/lose, either/or.

After you can identify the hurt and feel it in your body, welcome it. Stop fighting it. Stop splitting and blaming. Welcome the grief. Welcome the anger. It’s hard to do, but for some reason, when we name it, feel it, and welcome it, transformation can begin.

Don’t lose presence to the moment. Any kind of analysis will lead you back into attachment to your ego self. The reason a bird sitting on a hot wire is not electrocuted is quite simply because it does not touch the ground to give the electricity a pathway. Hold the creative tension, but don’t ground it by thinking about it, critiquing it, or analyzing it.

When you’re able to welcome your own pain, you will in some way feel the pain of the whole world. This is what it means to be human—and also what it means to be divine. You can hold this immense pain because you too are being held by the very One who went through this process on the Cross. Jesus was holding all the pain of the world, at least symbolically or archetypally; though the world had come to hate him, he refused to hate it back.

Now hand all of this pain—yours and the world’s—over to God. Let it go. Ask for the grace of forgiveness for the person who hurt you, for the event that offended you, for the reality of suffering in each life.

I can’t promise the pain will leave easily or quickly. To forgive is not to forget. But letting go frees up a great amount of soul-energy that liberates a level of life you didn’t know existed. It leads you to your True Self.

May we be able to approach life in a grace filled way, open to forgiving and being forgiven, knowing that the Spirit is with us when we pray, however we experience prayer and God. May we know we are not alone, as we seek forgiveness and seek to forgive as we move through the challenges of life. Amen.