

Last week there was an article in the Wall Street Journal about a 32 year- old Palestinian man named Mosab Hassan Yousef. Yousef's father, Sheikh Hassan Yousef is a founder and leader of the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas. In the opening line of the article, Yousef says, "*I absolutely know that in anybody's eyes I was a traitor. To my family, to my nation, to my God. I crossed all the red lines in my society. I didn't leave one that I didn't cross.*"

What would make Yousef commit treason against his family, nation, and God? His conversion to Christianity. Yousef writes about embracing Jesus Christ in his book called "Son of Hamas." While working alongside of his father for Hamas in the West Bank, Yousef met a British cab driver who gave him an English-Arabic New Testament and invited him to a Bible study at his hotel. It was there that this Islamic terrorist met a God with a different face.

Yousef says, "*I converted to Christianity because I was convinced by Jesus Christ as a character. I loved him, his wisdom, his love, his unconditional love....I found that I was really drawn to the grace, love and humility that Jesus talked about.*" In Jesus Christ, Yousef ate of the "true bread which gives life to this world", as we say in our collect for the 3rd Sunday in Lent.

Jesus' wisdom, grace, and unconditional love are on display in the parable He tells in today's gospel. It's His most famous story, one that is usually called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Although, as I talked about in my last sermon, that title is really a misnomer.

Why a misnomer? There are two sons in the story. The younger sins in the ways of the flesh, but the older sins in his cold, judgmental, works-righteousness oriented heart. Both sons sinned, so perhaps the story should be called the Parable of the Sinning Sons. But I still think that would be a misnomer. The story really should be titled after it's central character – the Father. This is really the Parable of the Forgiving Father. And as I talked about both sons in my last sermon, today I want to focus on the forgiving Father, a Father whose character is full of grace, humility and unconditional love. The kind of Father that would welcome even a terrorist.

The younger son sinned against his Father in two distinct ways – financially and relationally. Financially – the son took a third of the estate and left to sow his wild oats. He demanded his money, thereby diminishing the family capital by a third. So not only did he take his money, he reduced the family's ability to use that money to build wealth. This would have significantly lowered his Father's standing in the community.

More than that, though, the son demanded his inheritance. This is where the relational sin comes in. An inheritance is given, of course, at the time of a father's

death. So, the son in demanding his inheritance, is committing a kind of patricide. He is saying to his Father – you might as well go die, because your money is more important to me than your life. You are dead to me. Indeed, as the Father says later, after the boy's return, "My son was dead."

It is hard to imagine a deeper hurt, a deeper treason than the son's against his father. Ironically, it is not unlike Yousef's actions in relation to his father. He says his family has been shamed and has disowned him. "*My friends of yesterday became my enemies.*" The Father in the story has been shamed and disowned. Can you imagine how badly his son's treatment of him must have hurt? How would you respond?

Speaking honestly, I don't usually respond well in the face of hurt and betrayal. Hurt lingers, forgiveness does not come easily. What comes easily is the desire for vengeance.

A few years ago I went through an extremely difficult period that resulted from what I considered to be deep betrayal from people I thought were friends. From my perspective it was a kind of sustained and organized attack. I couldn't sleep at night; I was consumed by anxiety and worry. I not only wanted the attack to stop, I wanted the attackers to be brought to justice and punished. Of course I understood that forgiveness was God's command, as well as the pragmatic way forward, but I also knew that I was nowhere near being able to forgive.

Although this happened years ago, it doesn't take much for the hurt to ignite. Just seeing a person who has sinned against you causes an involuntary emotional and sometimes physical reaction. Larry French, the counselor that I see from time to time calls it the Perpetrator's Syndrome. Although years may have passed since the offending crime, just the sight or memory of the person causes hurt and the desire for vengeance.

As Emily Dickenson's poem attests, the damage caused by words lingers. "*A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say it just begins to live that day.*" Sometimes that day turns into decades, doesn't it?

I talk about this experience from the pulpit not to draw attention to myself, but because it is the best way to draw attention to the ways that this connects in your own life. In your marriage or with your parents or with your co-workers. In preaching, as in good writing, specific examples connect; generalities stay floating up in the air.

Thankfully, the Father in Jesus' story does not respond like I do, and perhaps if you are as unsanctified as I, you do. What does Jesus tell us in this story about God's unconditional love, humility, and grace? First we see that the Father stands on his porch, waiting, looking, longing for his lost son. He's not shut up inside, nursing his grudge.

And when the Father sees his son from a long way off (which tells us that the Father was intensely searching), the Father doesn't stay on his porch, rehearsing the speech that he'd been working up over the years of his son's absence. Son, how could you do this to me? Son, what were you thinking? Son, do you know how much this cost us? Son, there are consequences to your actions. No, the Father races out to greet his son.

All the commentators agree that this was a humiliating and even shameful act for the Father. The subservient always approached the elder, not the other way around. And, even worse, the Father had to lift his robes and bare his legs as he ran. Only boys in that culture – people of no standing – bared their legs. The Father didn't care; his son was coming home.

To seal the character of unconditional love and forgiveness in the Father, Jesus does something so interesting in this story. Although the son had a prepared apology for his father, the Father wouldn't even let him give it! Before his son said a word, his Father hugs and kisses him. For all the father knew, the son was coming back for what....more money!! That's what you would rightly expect. But before anything comes out of the son's mouth, he is met by his Father's love and forgiveness. The father doesn't even respond to the son's apology; he just orders a welcome home party.

Jesus says the father was moved by compassion. Did you know that is the most common description of Jesus' emotions in the gospels – compassion? It was this kind of compassion that led him finally to bear his legs and his body on the cross. He became poor that you might become rich. There he died for the forgiveness of our sins, even our sins of unforgiveness, even our lingering desires for vengeance. His word of forgiveness to you began that day and will continue on for all time, a word without end in a world without end.

Opportunities for the Father's kind of forgiveness happen every day, sometimes in big ways, often in small ways. For any relationship to be sustained, there must be forgiveness. For any community to be viable, there must be forgiveness. For any family to stay together, there must be forgiveness.

It is this word of forgiveness spoken to us that we hope will be planted into our hearts and one day bloom into forgiveness of those who have hurt us. I, for one, hope for it. It's worth believing in, that's for sure, even though you may cross some lines. It's worth believing in, not just because you'll sleep better, but because He is worth believing in – Jesus Christ and His grace, love and humility.

Amen.