

4th Sunday of Lent – March 31, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

When I went to bed on January 3, 1978, I was sad that Christmas vacation was over.

When I woke up on January 4, 1978, I learned what real sadness is. That morning, my parents told me the news: my Uncle Bob had been stabbed to death the night before.

The next few days are a blur. I cried. My mother wept. I watched my grandmother collapse as she stood by the casket for the final viewing. I was 15 years old, and began to understand how death breaks your heart.

And for the first time, I understood what *real* hate feels like.

Adults assured me that the man who killed my uncle would face justice.

But justice was not done. The trial became a circus. The verdict was “not guilty.”

Now, I was a 15 year old who felt betrayed. This man had ripped my family apart, and now he was free.

I *hated*. I carried that hate for several years. Finally, I went to confession, and told a priest how this hate was consuming me.

He told me that I needed to forgive. I had heard enough parables, enough sermons. I knew – intellectually – that I needed to forgive.

What I didn't know was – *how*. How do you forgive the man who killed your uncle?

And the priest said: “In order to forgive, something has to die.”

“Something *did* die,” I said. “My uncle died.”

And he said, “I understand that. But in order for YOU to forgive, something in YOU must die.”

I didn't understand. So he told me to pray, and ask God: “what is it in me that needs to die so that I can forgive?”

Eventually, God showed me. There *were* things inside of me that needed to die, attitudes I had to let go of, hopes I could no longer cling to.

What had to die in me?

I had to let go of the belief that the death of the murderer would somehow heal my family. That attitude had to die.

I had to let go of the naïve, youthful belief that life is always fair, that human systems always get the answer right, that people always do the right thing. That had to die in me.

And I had to let go of the belief that, if I just hated that man enough, my hate would make him feel as bad and he had made us feel. The only person being hurt by my hate was *me*... and maybe my family! Forgiveness would bring freedom. Hate, the hate in me, had to die, because it kept making a victim of me.

Do I still wish that the legal system had worked better? Sure. Do I painfully remember my grandparents' tears? Of course. But I know that I'm on the road to forgiveness, because I can remember all of this, but that man, and his actions, no longer control me.

The priest said: *in order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die.*

In today's parable, did you notice that something dies? No one ever preaches a sermon about the Parable of the Prodigal Son from the point of view of the fattened calf!

We think about the father, who generously forgives *two* sons. We think about the younger son, who runs off, proclaiming that his happiness will only be found far away from his horrible family. We think of the older son, who lives in his father's house but feels distanced from him.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is probably the most famous and engaging story Jesus ever told. Ultimately, it's a story about finding our way home, to where we belong, to that place where we finally experience forgiveness.

But in order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die.

Yes, the calf dies, so that the feast can happen. But on a much deeper level, every character in this story has to let go of something. Something in each of them has to die.

Take, for instance, the father. He lives in a culture where respect for elders is essential. And if a child showed public disrespect for a parent, or failed to live a respectable life, that brought shame upon the whole family.

In this parable, the younger son said to his father, "give me my inheritance now," which basically means, "I wish you were dead." He left home, and publicly wasted his father's hard-earned money on loose living. This behavior brought shame to the whole family. A Jewish boy feeding pigs! Oi.

How does a dad like this forgive a boy like that? On one hand, every parent discovers that it is possible to love someone who breaks your heart. But this father grew up in a culture where public respect was essential for family honor, and his son had broken every rule.

So, in order for dad to forgive his son, something had to die in him. What had to die? The hope that his sons, his family, would be perfect. What had to die? He had to let go of life as he had *hoped* it would be, and figure out if he could love his sons as they actually were.

And you know what? He discovered that he could. He loved his younger son. All he wanted was for him to come home. He loved his older son. All he wanted was for him to realize that being together is more important than what's for dinner.

The older boy needed to forgive his dad and brother. So something had to die in him. Maybe it was the youthful notion that you can only love people who 'deserve' your love. What had to die in him? The notion that he would love his dad and brother only if they did things *his way*.

And the younger son? At some point, he would have to forgive himself. What would have to die for that to happen? His *pride*. His sense of invincibility. He had abandoned his family because he had a grand plan for his life. And it all fell apart. He failed. In order to forgive himself, something would have to die in him: his narcissism, the conviction that he alone knew what is best, the confidence that he could never possibly make horrible mistakes. His pride would have to die, so that forgiveness could be born in a heart full of new humility.

"In order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die." I was shocked when the priest first said that to me in confession. But then I realized: when we Catholics come to church, one of the central images in every church is *a crucifix*, an image of someone dying. Someone who was perfect. Someone who did not deserve this suffering. And yet, as he died, he was able to say, "Father, forgive them."

On the cross, Jesus entered into the most horrible reality of the human journey, and there he proclaimed forgiveness. He proclaimed love. The cross took him to the tomb, but that love could not be conquered. Love wins. Life wins. Forgiveness happens, through the cross to the resurrection.

Many of us struggle with forgiveness. As Christians, we *want* to forgive, but we're not sure how to move in that direction. We want to find our way home. We are tired of our hate and our mistakes taking us far away from the Lord, leaving us lost and starving. We know we need to be forgiven. We know we need to forgive.

If you are stuck and can't experience God's forgiveness, or if you are stuck forgiving someone else, perhaps that priest's question could be a good guide to your prayer.

What in you needs to die? What must you let go of? That is a hard question and a hard task. So just keep coming back to church, and ponder this Crucifix.

For forgiveness to happen, *someone died*. And he rose to life again!

Jesus will teach you how to let go, how to let some obstacle die within you, so that you can experience the freedom, the healing, the peace that comes from forgiveness. He will teach you how to die, and he will show you how to rise to the life that never ends.

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