

## The Parable of the Two Debtors

Undercover Ice Cream Priest. It's one of the proudest nicknames I've ever earned and it was given to me by Danni, a police woman in Berlin this last June. As many of you know, I walked most of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in France and Spain this Spring, about 380 of the 500 miles from St. Jean Pied-de-Port in France to Villafranca del Bierzo in Northwestern Spain. I met many fellow pilgrims from around the world, and it was Danni who gave me the name of which I'm so proud. "Priest" because I'm a pastor. "Ice cream" because, well you can guess. "Undercover" because, dressed in hiking shorts, a backpack, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap I didn't really look like a pastor.

As people on the pilgrimage came to know I was a pastor they sometimes came to me with questions. One, whom we'll call Rick, came to me with a confession. He had been in recovery from alcoholism and drug abuse for two years and it was time to put his life together. He'd heard he should go on a pilgrimage and while he was walking he could work out some of the guilt and shame he was carrying. As part of his descent into chemicals, he had cheated, stolen, broken hearts, fathered a child, been violent toward loved ones, and now he was trying to put his life away. The problem was the overwhelming sense of guilt and shame he felt every day as he looked back, through sober eyes, on the life he had made.

*What do you do with a sinner like Rick? That's when I told him about the rock and the Cruce de Ferro.*

The story doesn't say how this woman got in, but it was clear that the presence of the sinful woman in his home made Simon the Pharisee uncomfortable. By virtue of being a religious man and leader of the synagogue, Simon knew the difference between right and wrong. Whatever the woman had done there's really no disagreement that it was wrong. She was a prostitute or a thief or a liar or an adulterer.

She broke something. Not just a law, but she broke a heart, or promise, or a home. We can belittle the price that someone paid – not just her. Simon sees her as a sinner because she hurt someone, hurt them deeply.

And she's exactly the kind of person to stay away from. Religion supports that – stay unstained from the world; don't touch the unclean; remove yourself from all sin; lead a pure life. A godly life.

And now this woman is making a show of it, a ludicrous display of emotion – all of this toward a man who, if he is holy, should know better.

As Jesus sees Simon's discomfort, he offers a simple story. Two people were in debt to a lender. Neither had enough to pay. One owed 500 denarii, the other 50. The lender forgives both debts.

Who, Jesus asks, will be more grateful? And in that question, Jesus turns upside down the primary religious understanding of his day for how a person gets on the right side of God.

Because the story explains to Simon that:

- God is the one who forgives;
- God is the one who has forgiven Simon's few sins;

- God is the one who has forgiven the woman's many sins; and
- Sometimes a forgiven sinner is more genuinely religious than a religious man.

*What do you do with a sinner like the woman in Simon's house?*

For Jesus, the answer is: you forgive her. And that seemingly easy forgiveness is what makes Simon most upset. Simon probably belongs to the school of thought that says if you forgive someone you don't do society a favor, and you don't do them a favor either.

It's clear that Simon belongs to the strict father school. According to cognitive linguist George Lakoff a fair percentage of people believe that the operative metaphor for God is that of a strict father. In this model, *discipline* is necessary for people to become responsible adults. The spiritual life is about *working* to *earn* a place in the heart of God because you *deserve* it. Someone who doesn't do the work doesn't deserve it. They haven't paid their dues.

So let's say you forgive a woman like this. What's to stop her from just going out and doing more sinning? And others from sinning, too? Bad behavior should be punished. It is punishment and the fear of punishment that keeps people in line, keeps society safe, and satisfies God's desire for justice and holiness.

This is the God of the Old Testament. The invasion of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians was seen as the punishment of God. The invasion of Judea by the Babylonians was seen as the punishment of God. In fact, blindness or leprosy or epilepsy or illness was often seen as the punishment of God. This God demands our obedience and is full of anger and demands justice for our sin.

*So what do you do with a sinner like the woman in Simon's house?*

The answer is the same for the woman as it is for Rick. It's about the rock and the Cruce de Ferro.

The Cruce de Ferro is a a 40 foot, iron cross at the top of a mountain pass on the pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela. For hundreds of years, pilgrims have taken a rock from their hometown with them on the pilgrimage and brought it to the site of the Cruce de Ferro and laid it at the foot of the cross. It's a symbolic act of penance designed to live out the act of God's forgiveness of our sins. The symbol is that Jesus forgives us of everything we have ever done, and we can lay down the burden of guilt and shame at his feet.

In the words of Simon, "So now he is even forgiving sins?" And the answer is "yes." Jesus is the sign for us that God forgives our sins.

The signs of forgiveness are all over Jesus' life. The woman caught in adultery – "where are those who condemn you? Neither do I condemn you." The disciples ask him, "How many times are we supposed to forgive someone – seven?" and Jesus answers, "Not seven, but seventy times seven." But the most dramatic example is Jesus on the cross. He has been crucified and is dying. He looks at the thief who has been crucified next to him and says the words of forgiveness, "This day I will see you in paradise." And he looks out to the people who have crucified him and says, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

For centuries Christianity has wondered how this forgiveness could happen. One of the ancient biblical models is blood atonement – for every sin there needs to be a sacrifice. Jesus is the sacrifice for our sins. His blood pays the price for us.

I've never been persuaded by that argument, because I think it is actually much simpler than that. The formula goes like this: You are a beloved child of God. You can't earn it and you can't lose it. It's more like Romans, chapter 8: Nothing you can do can separate you from the love of God.

God's forgiveness is simply saying that God's love is not conditioned on our behavior. Our forgiveness is simply saying that we will love, unconditionally, even when that love is difficult and painful.

The beauty of forgiveness as a lifestyle is when the time comes that someone has broken our heart, or a promise, or a home, we will not be held captive. We will not be stuck at the place of pain. Theologian Roberta Bondi<sup>1</sup> says that the work of forgiveness is part of God's larger work of making the whole world new. In other words, by forgiving us, God starts a new story for us, give us a new hope. The promise in this is that when we recognize we are loved, not condemned, we are free to love, not to condemn others. This is all part of Jesus' work of creation and resurrection. God is in Christ making the world new, making us new.

Forgiveness is part of God's urging of us – luring of us – into a better future. We can only grasp that future if we can let go of the pain of the past. And the new hope that God offers us is contingent on only one thing – letting go of the pain of the past. It is what keeps a person who has been wronged from becoming a victim.

*What do you do with a sinner like Rick? You forgive him.*

*What do you do with a sinner like the woman at Simon's house? You forgive her.*

*What do you do with a sinner like Charles Carl Roberts?*

October 2, 2006 was a dark and evil day at the West Nickel Mines School in Bart Township, Pennsylvania. It was on that day that Charles Carl Roberts, a 32 year old milk man, walked into an elementary school, took 10 young girls hostage, and one after one shot them before taking his own life. Five of the girls died – Lena, Ann, Marian, Mary, and Naomi. The oldest 13, the youngest 7. A community and nation were in shock and grief over the cruelty and brutality of the crime.

But the nation was even more shocked at what happened afterward. Within one hour of the crime, members of the Amish community went to family members of the killer to comfort them. Thirty members of the Amish community attended the graveside service of Charles Carl Roberts, and never ceased consoling the family on its loss. His widow wrote this open letter to her Amish neighbors:

"Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."<sup>2</sup>

*What do you do with a sinner like Charles Carl Roberts?*

*What do you do with sinners like us?*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Redeeming the Story*, Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 7

<sup>2</sup> At [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish\\_school\\_shooting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amish_school_shooting), viewed on August 8, 2008.