

Sherrí Alms: Redemption and the Redneck

Sherrí Alms

Redemption and the Redneck

Good morning. Usually, when I volunteer to give a sermon, it is because I have a lot I want to say about something. It's easy to write then because I simply think about it while living my daily life. My brain percolates; I sit down on Saturday, and a couple of hours later, I have a sermon for Sunday. Not so in this case. In this case, I had something I wanted to talk about but **nothing** to say. In fact, I despaired at Celebration Circle and told them I was going to learn how to say forgiveness in 50 languages and, for a grand finale, I would spell it out with my body. Yes, forgiveness is my topic and you'll be relieved to know I won't be giving you the sermon I just described.

The title of this sermon is Redemption and the Redneck. It is a sermon of stories – stories about forgiveness, what it is and what it isn't. I can't guarantee happy endings to the stories I will tell you. I can't even guarantee that there will be endings to the stories, because that is the way of forgiveness. We cannot force forgiveness. We cannot simply say the words and expect it to be so.

The first story begins with Isaac, he who his father almost sacrificed in fulfilling the will of God. Isaac is now an old man, married to Rebekah and near death. He has two sons, Esau and Jacob, twins. Esau emerged first from his mother's womb and so is counted as the oldest. This is what the Bible says about Esau at his birth: "The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle." He was followed by Jacob, who gripped

Esau's heel. As a grown man, Esau is described as "a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob."

Having grown up in the South, I knew Esau immediately. He's a redneck, quick of temper, fond of hunting, probably a member of the NRA, enjoys a beer or two or three in front of the TV when his hunting is done and is as opinionated and hot-headed as a man comes. Quick to give up his birthright for a bowl of stew, Esau lives life as it comes to him, the kind of person who lives for today and the devil take tomorrow.

By contrast, his twin, Jacob, is quiet. I imagine him as the studious, intellectual one, who would rather lie about the tent reading books all day than be outside trying to kill animals. As his mother's favorite, I imagine that he is an attentive and caring son. In fact, I bet you Jacob would have belonged here to Seekers, a bookish, questioning fellow, full of dreams and hopes for his future.

So already I am rooting for Jacob in this story. According to the description, he is the kind of man I would be friends with, would perhaps be in community with here at Seekers. Esau is too much like too many men I knew and disliked in Texas, the state where I was born.

And yet it is Jacob who gains Esau's birthright by selling him a bowl of stew. No matter how much we think Esau should have known better, Jacob carried out what amounted to a con game on his brother. With his mother's prodding and complicity, he seals the deal by dressing up as Esau to obtain his father's blessing. Having fraudulently purchased the birthright and deviously gained the blessing, Jacob flees. He is no innocent – he knows that Esau has a right to fury.

In fact, Jacob lives the next decades of his life never sure if Esau has forgiven him. At the time of their next meeting

when both are old men, Jacob is sure that Esau means to kill him and does everything he can to pacify his brother. Ah, but what does Esau the redneck do? How does he behave? If he were to behave according to redneck stereotype, he would probably kill Jacob and take revenge by stealing all of his goods, which some of us may feel he has a right to anyway.

But this is not how Esau reacts. Genesis says: "...Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." Beyond even that generous greeting, he volunteers to travel alongside Jacob and his people and then when Jacob tells him how slowly they move, he volunteers to lend Jacob some of his people.

Here then in this hairy, unkempt hunter, this man who knows no better than to sell his birthright for stew, we find the very model of forgiveness.

Another more modern story also serves as a parable, a metaphor about forgiveness and the power it has over the lives of both the forgiver and the forgiven. This is a novel called *The Reader* by a man named Bernhard Schlink. In this novel located in Germany after World War II, a young man meets and has an affair with a middle-aged woman. She abruptly not only terminates their relationship but leaves the city as well. Years later as a law student sent to cover the concentration camp trials, the young man encounters his old lover, only now she is a defendant, charged as working as a guard at one of the camps. Even worse, she is charged with murdering a group of women from the camps by locking them in a church as they fled the Allies. The church caught fire and burned, killing all but two of the women.

Hanna shows no remorse for or recognition of what she has done to either the protagonist or to the women who died under her guardianship. She progresses through her life by refusing to see where she is wounded or where she has wounded others. Literally unable to read, Hanna is bound by a lack of

understanding that continues until shortly before her death. Not until she learns to read does she also discover the responsibility for what she had done. Prior to that pivotal moment in the short novel, *Hanna*, as the one in need of forgiveness, does not know how to ask it, cannot even frame the question to ask. In fact, she is evil as ignorance. The wrongs she inflicted were wrongs she could not grasp, much as she could not make sense of words on a page.

And what of her young lover? He has been grievously wounded by Hanna and yet has been unable all of his life to recover from that wound. He carries it with him and lives with it by numbing himself to all feeling, to all other love that would have, could have come his way. He cannot even bring himself to reply to the letters Hanna writes him once she is in jail for her Holocaust crimes. Though he recognizes that he loved her best of anyone in his life, he cannot bridge the chasm of hurt that stands between them. This is not a pretty book, not a book of happy endings but it is a book that gives us pause, much as the story of Jacob and Esau does.

What I noticed that these stories held in common was that those they loved, loved dearly, wounded both the boy and Esau. What greater bonds than those between twins? Or those between lovers? We are most deeply wounded and capable of holding the biggest grudge against those we love the most and who love us back, flawed though that love may be. Given that we are most likely not only to hurt but also be hurt by those we love the most, what then is forgiveness? I was always taught in Sunday School that forgiveness was automatic. You were more or less required of God to forgive those who wronged you, to turn the other cheek. And that would be easy if our hurts were only superficial and inflicted by strangers. It is easy to quickly forgive and forget when the wrong is that I was overcharged for a tomato. But what is forgiveness when it comes to betrayal, rape, abuse, adultery, murder, infidelity or any of the sins that we commit against those we love? While you may

shake your head, unable to resonate to rape or murder or adultery, I can assure you that we all sit in two seats today, that of the forgiver and the forgiven. I know I forget that too much of the time and then I remember that I betrayed my best friend in college in a way I will never forget. It is the thorn in my side in many ways and it is there for many reasons, one of which is to remind me of the beauty of forgiveness.

Paradoxically, forgiveness is also an ugly process. Ugly because it requires that we bare our wounds, look at the blood and the gore, the infection that may result. We cannot forgive until we acknowledge the wound, and admit that we have been hurt. And acknowledge as well the ugly feelings of hate and anger that rise up boiling in us when we realize the depth of the wound, the infection it may have caused, and the scar it will most certainly leave behind. As I said, we all sit in two seats today, the forgiver and the forgiven. As I betrayed my best friend, I also have had to work on forgiveness. As a young woman, I dated a man once who I had known for years before we dated. But one night after an argument, he held me down and raped me. That happened 15 years ago. A mutual friend recently told me that she would see him again at a high school reunion. All I could think was I would love to go and give him a black eye. I'm still working on forgiving him and still walk backward and forward through forgiveness. Is it okay to hate someone who has wronged you, to be angry? Yes, if you can acknowledge that hate and anger, let it boil up through you and find a safe way out. This is where turning the other cheek comes in for me. I turn the other cheek not by suppressing my negative feelings but by working through them safely.

Once the hate and anger are released, we can move on to entertaining the idea of forgiveness, giving up any revenge we may have wanted to take. The Greek word for forgiveness also means letting go. When we move through the process of forgiveness, we let go of revenge. We've all heard stories of

parents of murdered children who have forgiven their children's murderers. I doubt there are many people as justified in seeking revenge as those who have lost children. Yet somehow these parents have managed to forgive. I have often thought they must be saints or liars. But the truth is that the need for revenge imprisons the one seeking the revenge more probably than it imprisons the wrongdoer. Seeking revenge, according to Ernest L. Boyer, Jr., condemns us "to live in the past, to live with the bitterness of disappointment in the expectation of the future that never was." So we are chained by bitterness in a cell called the past. For our own sakes, we need to find a way to break that chain, to move out of that cell.

I had a discussion with a friend once about whether there is such a thing as a truly selfless act. At first, I argued that there was but have since come to believe that all of our acts for the good, for the holy, are for us as much as they are for God or the poor or children. When we can let go of revenge, we move out of darkness and into the light. When we forgive, we release a spark of the divine essence that we call God. Not only does it warm us as it goes, it flies into the night and illuminates many others, including the one who wronged us. Forgiving is a communal act that helps us to move on as it helps the forgiven to move on.

The next phase of forgiveness is the hardest one for me, that of actively forgiving the injurer. In this phase, we see that the injurer may have endured the same kind or even deeper wounds than those he or she inflicted on us. Empathizing, though, is not another word for excusing. Rather, it is a way of seeing the injurer as a member of the human community. We recognize the responsibility the injurer holds for the hurt inflicted but we can also see that there is more to the person. Thich Nhet Hanh wrote a poem called *Please Call Me By My True Name*. One stanza is about the boat people he struggled to save from the glaring indifference of world governments:

I am the 12-year old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate. And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

When we can feel as that girl felt, can put ourselves in the other's place, then we see not with the eye of the mind but with the eye of the heart. Then we don't weigh the scales of justice in our head because we see that we have not only been wronged, we have committed wrongs against others as well. Then we know what it is to forgive because we know we need forgiveness as well. This is where forgiveness used to get mushy for me because I thought I was required to bring that person back into my circle again. But there are hurts that do not require reconciliation or trust yet still can be forgiven. To forgive, we acknowledge the wounder's humanity and place in the world and then move on from there. Here, we acknowledge another paradox, that in giving to others the gifts of mercy and generosity, we give ourselves a gift as well – the gift of healing.

Those of you who know me know I love poetry. I don't think I've given a sermon yet that didn't have at least one poem in it and this sermon is no exception. This is a poem written by Sharon Olds about forgiveness. It's called *Late Poem to My Father*.

This then is healing – redemption – forgiveness – facing the past, understanding the girl and the pirate, the child and the father, letting go and going on.