

Luke 15:11-32

Wilderness comes in different forms. I was nineteen years old starting my Junior year at NC State. That summer, I was to attend a six-weeks of basic training for Air Force officers at Dover, Delaware. I was excited except for the one-night delay in New York City. It's amazing how you can be surrounded by thousands of people, and still feel alone, isolated, overwhelmed. Stepping into the hustle and bustle of LaGuardia Airport into the big city, it didn't take me long to say to myself, well Roger, you're not in North Carolina anymore. My southern hospitality of smiles and throwing up my hand as a gesture of Hello were met with only strange looks. Didn't take me long to stop. Rather than exploring the night lights of New York, I spend that night in my room praying ": please Lord get me out of New York City. The wilderness can be overwhelming even in the big city. It can rob your soul.

Have you ever thought of the Prodigal Son as a wilderness journey? There was a man who had two sons. An impatient son requests half of his inheritance, despite his father still being alive. His father agrees, he leaves home heads for the big city. Spends the money irresponsibly on lavish items. Then the wilderness comes. Famines, lack of funds forces him to eat some humble pie. He ends up working herding pigs living an impoverished lifestyle. It is at this point that greed and regret emerge, as well as jealousy. He looks at the pigs and envying how they have food to eat where he has none. At least he realizes that this wilderness was not for him.

At this point, the son chooses to return to his father, says he was foolish and wrong. Seek forgiveness, hope for a job as a hired hand. He acknowledges his greed and actions. To his surprise, his father doesn't bring up the past, rather he offers forgiveness and celebrates his return. At this point, jealousy emerges. His older brother remained behind, working hard on the family farm, loyal to his father, not wasting his inheritance doesn't get a party. Well, at least he not going to his brother's party.

In the wilderness, you will experience a lot of drama. We do things, say things, feel things brought to the surface. In the wilderness, you experience the lows of conflicting

hidden emotions express through actions and dialogue or the highs of exciting emotional in unexpected series of events.

Drama- It's a common term used in schools. Teachers are aware of the unseen explosive piece of dynamite that each adolescent carries. Dormant, once denoted, it's as deadly as a roadside bomb inflicting moral injuries in the classroom. Ask any teacher.

Drama: a sunset or sunrise that takes your breath away, tears of joy holding a newborn baby. Red moon or solar eclipse, the Grand Canyon, a flock of geese soaring overhead. Drama

Sarah had a slight fever and mild cough. To receive sympathy and attention, she tells everyone she is deathly ill.

Debra lost her keys then spent four hours crying and yelling at her husband.

Someone stole Steve's can of Coke out of the break room fridge, now he believes that someone is out to destroy him.

Drama. the ups and downs of life. Drama encompasses the range of human emotions and appetites, from laughter to tragedy, spiritual darkness, and light, the physical manifestation of contagious laughter to guilt-ridden shame, and everything in between. Its images range from quiet flowing water, gentle breezes to raging storms. It's the soother of soul or the devil in disguise. It opens and closes the hopes and vision hidden in the book of dreams stirring our emotions and imaginations. It's revealed in our drawing, music, even in our worship, moving our very being forward or backward. It's our strength, our weaken, our opportunity, and our threat. Common to all, we each navigate its impact upon the wooden ship we journey in. Drama-from birth to death it will move us. It will confront, control, comfort, conflict, challenge us. Sometimes we don't need someone else to create our drama. For me, the drama is synonymous with the wilderness. The wilderness is about those surprising twists and turns in life and our responses.

The wilderness-a common human condition that none of us can escape.

None of us are immune to life's drama. From sport, movies, politics, solitude, big cities, little towns, and countrysides we are surrounded by the wonders, the majesty of drama. On the other spectrum, we see the horrible side of drama- obsession, rape, abuse, murder in its many forms. In diverse groups, we see and experience drama in many forms some healthy and some not so healthy.

It is easy to get caught up in the drama-in the wilderness. I must confess, I can only take so much. My first steps are: I check out, I deny, hidden, try to forget, I retreat to the land of smoke and mirror, forgetting I still carry that unseen explosive piece of dynamite. Just letting it simmer right under the surface until...Boom! There are moments in life's drama I am caught in the thick of it. IT'S Not an if, but a "when" I get caught up in a drama that makes me say, do, behave contrary to my nature. Caught, I rationalize and justify, my place in the sandbox. I enter the world of only right and wrong. I right, you're wrong. I look at your speck, not my own, digging in my heels just to avoid eating my own words.

And before I know it, I get caught up in the blame game, the figure pointing. In the heat of battle where all reason goes out the window, it will take a million years before I even consider talking to you ever again. Drama.

There was a woman who had two daughters. drama- greed, arrogance, jealousy, hurt, unforgiving. Just a few of the enemies you will meet in the wilderness.

In the bayou and murky waters of our souls harboring guilt, grief, loss, betrayal, doubt, loneliness, depression, despair, obsessions, addictions, anger, fear, and anxiety, living in dismal places of the shadows of my hurts, forgiveness is the last thing on my mind. Forgiveness feels like a decision to reward my enemy. Until I hear unexpected words in the wilderness.

I hate being late. It's one of my ways of staying out of the wilderness, keeping control. A few years ago, Cindy and I stumbled into Lexington Cinema Theater on a Saturday night late. The movie had already started, and even with the screen's light, we could

barely find a seat must less notice who else was there. The movie-The Finest Hour is based on a true story.

In February of 1952, one of the worst storms to ever hit the East Coast struck New England, damaging an oil tanker off the coast of Cape Cod and ripping it in half. On a small lifeboat faced with frigid temperatures and 70-foot high waves, four members of the Coast Guard set out to rescue more than 30 stranded sailors trapped aboard the rapidly sinking vessel.

The pilot of the rescue boat had lost faith in himself, the people in his community has lost faith in him, and even the volunteered crews that were to go out with him had lost faith in him. Because, because of what happened on a previous mission he piloted where all lives of a few of the village fisherman were lost in a less violent storm a few months early. Now another rescue. What would happen?

In the end, the rescue crew and pilot pulled up in the town's harbor in the pitch of darkness, without a compass to guide him, with 32 survivors clinging to a small craft. Just seeing, hearing this story filled me with all types of drama, stirring my emotions and imagination. The movie ended.

The lights came back on the theater, Cindy and I were the only ones there. At that moment, I heard the blessing of the wilderness from the finality of the movie. The epic words when the leader of the town turns to the pilot and said all is forgotten, all is forgiven.

Where the wilderness of unforgiveness remains, bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, and malice swell into your life. These emotions are evidence of unforgiveness and lead to self-destruction. Like a tornado across a Kansas wheat field, an unforgiving heart rips a path of destruction through your life and the lives around you.

In the wilderness, I step back and look in the shadow of the cross, forgiveness is a gift from one undeserving soul to another. Forgiveness begins with a crisis in the wilderness. We all the old saying, I'll forgive but I would forget. Is that forgiveness? The crisis of forgiveness leads us to a decision. It's not only an act of our will but an

understanding of God's grace. When you choose to release a person who he or injures you, this is the crisis of forgiveness. It's a decision: *I choose to forgive. I'm not trying to get even or looking for vengeance. I don't wish for bad things to happen to that person. I'm not focusing on the offense, rather. I've released that person. Is that not what God has done for us.*

Forever forgiven. That's prevenient grace—divine grace that precedes our human decision, even before we know and experience the love of God. After the crisis of forgiving comes the process to forget, another wilderness journey where deep healing takes place. In the crisis of forgiveness, you say, “I choose to forgive,” but in the process of forgetting you say, “I will treat you as though it never happened.” I will treat you like God has treated me. You forget by

Not bringing up the offense to the person
Not bringing up to others.

And hardest of all, not bringing up the offense to yourself. I will not replay it or dwell on it.

Forever forgotten- The process of forgiveness is not quick or clean, and when you falter in the process, you must return to the crisis—the wilderness. Perhaps you chose to forgive, only to retract that gift of grace and to begin again to nurse the injury. Maybe you committed to forgetting but fell back into your old patterns of resentment when you crossed paths with the person again. When you realize the unforgiveness is creeping back, you must revisit the crisis and choose again to forget and forgive. Releasing others resulting in releasing yourself.

Behind Forever is Forgiveness, behind forgiveness is forever. It is the story of God's amazing grace that allows us to forgive, that allows us to forget. In the wilderness, you discover new life in Christ.

When all is forgiven and forgotten, damaging emotions are gradually eliminated and replaced with tenderhearted kindness, empathy, and the letter L=love. It's Valentine's Day. What a great day to send the good news: In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven, you can let go, and come out of the wilderness.

Prayer: Lord, your example of forgiveness is so strong, so clear, so pure, while I am so small and so petty. My unforgiveness injures me and those I love. Please bring to my mind those people I need to forgive, one of which is myself. I choose to forgive [the crisis]. Please give me Your strength to live out that forgiveness in my journey with you. Let it begin today. process]. By faith, I believe Your ways are best, so even though forgiveness isn't natural to me, I choose it. Lord, I realize the quieter I become, the more I can hear that small still voice. Holy Spirit, as you call me softly and tenderly, please empower me to do what I can't do on my own. Let me sing Alleluia-Let me praise you, so I can see what you have done for me Forever forgiven, forever forgotten: Let me be able to flow in peace that passes understanding to forgive others "as God in Christ forgave [me]." In Jesus' name, I pray, amen