

I want to start by telling the kids about an injustice that I suffered in childhood.

One afternoon when my brother and sister and I were all still young, we were finishing our lunch at home. We had eaten our fruit, so our mother went to the cookie cupboard, which was too high for us to reach, and got out a package of Oreos. She passed it to my older brother, and he took out two cookies. She passed it to me, and I took out two cookies. She passed it to my younger sister, and she took out one cookie...and then two cookies stuck together. Our mother slid the package back into the cupboard—and my brother and I went crazy. Everybody knows that two cookies stuck together are two cookies, not one cookie! In our minds, it was unimaginably unfair that our mother would have let our sister have three cookies while we got only two. All of us children remember this incident because it seemed that one of us got something that she didn't deserve from someone who was supposed to be looking out for all of us.

Today's Bible reading is what is called "the parable of the prodigal son." "Prodigal" means wasteful or lavish. That's what the younger brother in the Bible story was. He demanded that his father give him money, then he went out and spent it foolishly, until it was gone and he was hungry. Like the older brother in the story, my brother and I had done what was expected of us with the Oreos that our mother offered: we had taken two cookies. When our sister took three, it looked to us like being sneaky and greedy were qualities that our mother suddenly and inexplicably decided to reward.

But when you grow up, you learn things. I learned that not everyone is offered cookies every day, as I was. Like the older brother in the Bible story, I was loved and taken care of. I lived in a house where I had my own bedroom and a yard with a swingset and a dog with floppy bangs, and on weekends my family went skiing in the winter and boating in the summer. When you are loved and taken care of, and have been given two cookies, it is ungrateful to complain because you want more. I also learned as I grew older, that my little sister was often lonely. For several years, she was the youngest child in the neighborhood. If my brother and I didn't want to play with her, she didn't have anyone to play with. When my sister was ten, our mother got a job, which meant that my sister came home to an empty house after school. Like the father in the story, our mother understood that our sister needed to be loved in a way that was different from how my brother and I needed to be loved. She knew that our baby sister had a kind of pain that we didn't have. She forgave the little girl's greed, and she reminded my brother and me that we had everything that we needed.

The parable of the prodigal son is about a father who forgives his child, but I want to ask you children to do something difficult this Lent, which is to forgive your parents. When I was a child, I was what adults called “very sensitive.” In first grade, I would sometimes cry at my desk, maybe because a boy ran away at recess or because the teacher scolded the class, and these things upset me. When my parents were unhappy with me, I would go to my room and close the door and sit with my back to it, sobbing, longing for them to knock on the other side and tell me that they were sorry for hurting my feelings. They never did. I am going to tell you something about my parents because they are not here and it will be our secret: they are not good at saying that they’re sorry. They are really good at taking me out to dinner and sending me greeting cards and building me furniture and sewing quilts for me and putting money into my savings account and being kind to my friends. But apologizing is something that no one ever taught them to do.

All parents are good at some things and bad at others. Parents agonize over whether or not they are loving their children the way that they need to be loved. When parents get together with their friends, they share their fears. They say things like: “I worry that I snap at them too much, just like my mother did to me.” Or, “I want to tell my daughter that she is beautiful, but I don’t want her to think that she has to be beautiful to please people, so I don’t know what to say to her.” Or, “I ride her so much about her homework, but I want her to be able to get into a good school and have the life that she wants.” Or, “I think he would like to be more independent, but I miss him when he’s not around.”

Parents need the forgiveness of their children. You might think that your parents don’t understand you or even that they don’t love you, but you are likely wrong. They do understand you. They know that they are hurting your feelings, and it is devastating to them. Sometimes they can’t stop themselves or they don’t want to because they are trying to protect you from another kind of evil. Sometimes they don’t know exactly how they are causing you harm, but they know that they have power, and they worry that one, badly chosen word from their mouths will ruin your life. It is a heavy burden to be a parent precisely because parents love their children so much; they want everything for you, and they cannot possibly provide everything. They need you to understand that and to forgive them for their mistakes.

Parents, I have something hard for you to do as well: forgive yourselves. The kids will say, “Wait a minute! Why are the adults getting all of the forgiveness?” The answer to that is, “Because we need it more than you do.” We have been living longer, and we have made more mistakes than you have, and, because we are bigger than you are and have more freedoms,

they have been bigger mistakes. I have a friend who is a recovering alcoholic, and she struggles with forgiveness, which is defined in the AA program as ceasing to wish that the past had been different. The events of the past include our own bad behavior, and it is very difficult to look back on how stupid or angry or cruel we have been and not want to change it.

In one of my English classes in college, we read Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which is regarded as an American masterpiece and also as problematic because it employs language that is racist. We discussed this, and the only person who said that she was offended by that language was the one black person whom I remember being on the entire campus. I argued forcefully that for an author to put racist words into the mouths of racist characters was both appropriate and necessary, and I privately scoffed that a light-skinned black girl at an expensive private college had little to say about the experience of Africans under slavery.

I am ashamed of that younger version of myself, who was so ignorant and nasty about the suffering of others. But looking at her squarely and forgiving her helps me to remember that I still have blind spots, that I may be unkind today in ways that I will discover years from now. Forgiving myself makes me more open to the damaged hearts and egos of others, and more delicate with them.

And God gives us opportunities to correct our mistakes. In the 1990's, I worked at Barnes & Noble in downtown Minneapolis where we had a gang problem. Graffiti decorated the men's room. Young, black men slept on chairs next to stacks of books that hadn't been paid for but the bindings of which had been bent back and broken. When asked to leave, the men would scowl and swear and threaten. Staff quit because of the stress. On Martin Luther King, Jr. day, a group of black school kids pushed a girl through the glass of our vestibule in an attempt to steal her jacket.

One afternoon, I came upon one of the young, black men on the public pay phone in the store. I heard him say, "I'm at the library."

That changed me.

The library was four blocks away. My first instinct, because I was afraid of him, was to think triumphantly, "What an idiot!" But then what sank in was the fact that I had had a mother who drove me to the library when I was a child, and got me a library card, and who took me to the bookstore, too, and bought books for me, so that the distinction became obvious. I understood, with those four words—I'm at the library—that my life and this man's life had been different.

I was charged then with hosting story times for children. I found an elementary school in a building two blocks away, and I began to invite a classroom over each week. I read the students picture books, after which they would sit cross-legged on the floor, flipping through stories on their own. Most of the kids qualified for free lunch. Some had relatives in prison. At least one had been so badly abused that she didn't speak until the fourth grade. I started a program with the teachers, who selected a "Reader of the Month" nine times each year. I presented the award at assembly, and the winning student received a gift card to buy books at the store. I was there one day, when a young, black boy stood at a register and was handed a bag containing three books he had chosen as his reward. He was beaming. It was one of the most rewarding days of my life.

Being lost, being wrong is the human condition. Forgiveness—of others and of ourselves—is a leap of faith. It is part of the act of repentance. Without forgiveness, our mistakes become dusty monuments. With it, our lives leap forward. A few years ago, a friend said to me, "I've changed so much over the past twenty years. I can't wait to see," he said, "how I change over the next twenty."