One of my favorite films is *Smoke Signals*. The movie is about two young men – Victor and Thomas – growing up on the Coeur d’Alene Indian reservation in northwest Idaho.

There is a scene where Arnold – who is Victor’s estranged father – is walking down an isolated road with his neighbor, Suzy.

Arnold and Suzy barely know each other until he gives her a lift. They run out of gas and have to walk home.

As they walk, Arnold asks Suzy to tell him the worst thing she has ever done.

She tells him something she did to a friend long ago. Arnold replies that was bad, but not as bad as something terrible he did long ago to people he loved.

They tell each other about the shame that each has carried for years.

Suzy tells Arnold she has found peace with her past.

But for Arnold, there is no peace. His wrongs are eating him alive, and he is lost.

Sometimes life is like that.

Meanwhile, Victor dwells on his resentments about the hurts his father inflicted upon him. The two have not spoken in years.

Victor’s resentments are eating him alive. His resentments are a boulder in his path. He cannot get past his wounds, and he is lost.

Sometimes life is like that.

Maybe there is something we have done that is like a boulder in our path. Or maybe someone did something to us, and that is a boulder in our path.

Maybe we carry this boulder around for years, and it gets heavier and heavier, and we find no peace.

Questions about forgiveness and reconciliation are at the heart of the parable Jesus tells in the gospel lesson this morning. How do we forgive others? How do we forgive ourselves?

The parable Jesus tells is popularly called “The Prodigal Son,” but it might better be called “the Lost Sons” – plural – because it is really the story of two sons.
The parable begs the question: Who is the lost son? The one who needs forgiveness because he squandered his father’s wealth?
Or the one needing forgiveness because he is so resentful, he cannot see past anything other than his own hurts?
I truly believe that forgiveness is one of the hardest things we confront as human beings. There are no easy answers. Simple platitudes about “forgive and forget” don’t really cut it.
By the way, that phrase “forgive and forget” came from Shakespeare, not the Bible. [Richard II, Act I, Scene 1; and King Lear, Act 4, Scene 7]
The concept of forgiveness has vexed many religious thinkers. I don’t preach about it much, and for good reason.
How do we forgive Adolph Hitler for the Holocaust? How do we forgive the perpetrators of slavery, lynchings, and the racial bigotry and exploitation deeply embedded in our history and culture?
How do we get past the human trafficking of our own time? How do we get past sexual violence, hate crimes and crimes against children, and the mass shootings that seem to erupt like volcanoes every few weeks? How do we forgive any of that?
And should we?
We are certainly not called to ignore injustice. We are not called to cover our feelings with indifference or numbness or with cheap easy words that sound like forgiveness.
Nor does forgiveness mean putting ourselves in the position of being the victim, or asking others to be the victims. Jesus went to the Cross so we don’t have to.
So where does forgiveness come from? Is it even possible?
The Parable of the Lost Sons gives us a window into where the power of forgiveness comes from – and it truly comes from outside ourselves.
In Jesus’s parable, the younger son is completely lost, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. His shame has eaten him alive.
When he hits rock bottom, he goes home, willing to grovel in front of his father and offer himself as a servant – a slave – in his father’s household.
But notice this: His father sees him from far off, and the father runs to embrace his lost son.
In the ancient world, fathers don’t do that. Fathers don’t do that in our world either. They don’t run to their wayward sons to greet them. But this father does.
And notice this: Before the younger son can get a word out of his mouth to ask forgiveness, he receives forgiveness from his father. And his father then throws his son a party. Forgiveness is his before he ever asks.

Do you notice something else about the father in the parable? The only authority the father claims is the authority of compassion and love. The father casts away all pretense of being regal. He gives his errant younger son a king’s robe. His judgment is the judgment of love.

Then we hear about the older brother. The older brother, lost in his resentments, complains bitterly to the father. “What’s with giving a party to your slacker son?” His resentments are eating him alive.

And what does the father do? Invites the older brother to the party. The father tells the older son that everything is already his – all of it. Forgiveness and abundance already belong to the older son before he ever asks.

The story doesn’t tell us what happens next to either brother – that is the open-endedness of the parable.

Does the older brother join the party? We don’t know.

Does the younger brother live a new way? We don’t know.

Do the two brothers reconcile? We don’t know.

We write the end of the story through how we live our own life. The father keeps the door open for his sons – and keeps the door open for us.

Maybe this parable should really be called, “The story of the father’s extravagant, radical love” because that is what this is story truly about.

The real source of forgiveness and reconciliation comes from this over-the-top, loving God who embraces us, especially when it is beyond us to forgive others, or forgive ourselves.

I truly believe forgiveness is a miracle of healing.

This power of God’s forgiveness will heal us if we are open to it, and allow us to move beyond the shame or resentments that eat us alive.

This is not an intellectual exercise. This is not about memorizing Bible verses or church dogma. Forgiveness is not a human achievement.

Forgiveness is about the movement of the Holy Spirit, the guiding of our hearts within us.

But forgiveness can take time. Forgiveness doesn’t come with the snap of fingers. It takes time, and patience, to grow up as the people God created us to be.

Forgiveness does not require forgetting. In fact, it might be the opposite.
Forgiveness takes facing the past honestly so that the past will not hold us captive. Forgiveness requires understanding the past, not repeating it.

This is where prayer comes in. Surrendering through prayer to God’s mercy is a powerful way path to forgiveness when we have no power of forgiveness in ourselves.

I pray God, please hold in your hands the forgiveness that my hands cannot now hold.

Sometimes, it takes others to walk this path with us.

In the movie, Smoke Signals, the character Arnold dies in the Arizona desert without ever reconciling with his son, Victor.

Victor takes a bus from Idaho to Arizona to pick up his father’s ashes. His childhood friend, Thomas, goes with him.

As they travel, Victor seethes with resentment – and Thomas relentlessly sticks with him every step of the way.

In the end, Victor finds the meaning of forgiveness – and he finds himself.

The past is not forgotten, but the past no longer holds Victor captive. He once was lost, but now is found. He is new, whole, healed.

Indeed, true forgiveness is something larger than ourselves. Ultimately, when we are reconciled to each other, we are reconciled to our Creator God – and we are transformed in unimaginable ways.

I close with Saint Paul’s words: “Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.”

AMEN