



I want to tell you a story about a man named Felix. Felix, who had something happen earlier in his life that he couldn't quite manage to find forgiveness. It led him into seclusion in the Appalachia region of Tennessee, not to be seen for 40 years. And then, when hearing of a friend's death that he had lost touch with over the decades, Felix decided to pull off something completely counter-cultural, some would say even

bizarre, perhaps even more so when this all occurred nearly a century ago: Felix wanted to throw his own funeral party while he was still alive; some would say with the hope of finding the forgiveness that he could never find for himself.

He reeled in the local mortuary business willing to take on the unique proceedings, but he had to find the preacher. Amidst the planning for something that no divinity school or seminary would ever prepare a pastor for, the clergyman supposedly told Felix, "You can't buy forgiveness. It's free, but you do have to ask for it." Nevertheless, word soon got out, not just to the people in the nearby town, who remembered Felix from an almost bygone era; but the news also spread well, well beyond, about this man who wanted to be present for his own funeral, and thousands showed up. One take on the story so goes that what Felix couldn't allow himself to get over, to the point that in his own words, "I didn't want forgiveness. No. I needed to hold on to what I did, to be sick from it every day of my life." What had happened nearly half a century before was that he fell in love with a woman who was married, and attempting to save her from a husband who was abusing her, amidst a scuffle, a lamp fell and started a fire, of which Felix managed to escape, but unfortunately, could not save her. Supposedly the sister appeared 40 years later at the living funeral and somehow, somehow, managed to bless Felix with the forgiveness that he could never find. A few years later, when Felix did reach his earthly conclusion, at his burial, that same woman came and placed a picture of her sister in the coffin, a moving way to further recognize the power of forgiveness and grace, even to those who aren't so sure they deserve any of it.

I must say I didn't know anything about this story, and I still don't know exactly how I feel about it in its entirety, but it only came up within this past week, because the story of Felix Bush was brought to life to movie audiences around the world, a little over 15 years ago, when a certain actor named Robert Duvall played Felix in the movie cleverly entitled *Get Low*. Robert Duvall, who died a week ago today, and embraced characters that were rather complex, but still desired various forms of redemption and absolution, including forgiveness: from his only Oscar winning role in the 1980s film *Tender Mercies* about a washed-up rock star or *The Apostle* in the late 1990s that didn't exactly paint the best light on preachers, to put it mildly. Sometimes we in the church give Hollywood a hard time for dramatizing stories, including of the true account of Felix Bush from 1930s Tennessee, and the immense profit-making business of the industry. But sometimes it takes what people see on the big screen to really dig in to the deepest matters of life: on the car ride home from the theater, or just before falling asleep that night: of an actual possibility of forgiveness in shattered relationships, of the hope of there really being grace out there in the world, of the real historical plot twist of a God who can somehow, somehow, still love even of what we consider to be the worst of our human condition.

We tend to think of these healing weekends at Divinity more so for physical healing, which is needed, to be sure, but sometimes we need a healing that may be even more complex than the densest of medical science and research thrown in with prayer and Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we need a healing of past deeds that we can't manage to find forgiveness for, some of which we don't feel comfortable saying out loud, secluding certain parts of our heart for extensive periods of time. And as much as many of us value these weekends at Divinity, we also recognize that we may not be able to provide all the healing needed in this time and space.

But today, we hear one of the most powerful Psalms in the entire collection. Some would say it's about David. Perhaps. I like to think it's about all those who feel it in their very bones when they cannot bring their voice to dig in to the parts of their soul that desperately yearns for forgiveness and grace and a love that seems impossible to find. We recognize some of those conversations need to happen beyond these walls, encounters that some are scared to have. Not all healing will be taken care of today, but we can certainly offer the start of it. That if you hear about the God who can still more than manage to cherish you to your core, it might just be what is needed to reach out to another sibling in Christ that we have lost touch with over the years, someone else who might just need re-assured of the Gospel for them, too. This whole faith journey is not meant to be easy, including the forgiveness and healing portions, but we can be fully assured of the God who insists on being with us through it all, no matter how difficult the conversations, no matter how complicated the past, the promise of this Lenten season and for all our days with the cross at the center of it all: grace will always win out for you. So, for that Greatest News for us all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!