On our 25th wedding anniversary, Neil and I celebrated with our faith community at Mass. By chance the Gospel was the parable of the prodigal son, but it probably wasn't chance at all! This story is often applied to parents and children, but as I listened, I heard our journey in marriage.

I remembered one of our sons saying that the father didn't just happen to be on the hill that day, that he went out every day and watched the road, waiting to forgive. In many ways this is what happens in marriage. We become road watchers. Marriage involves waiting, sometimes through real or emotional distance, sometimes through deep hurts, and it calls us to seek and offer forgiveness. Marriage asks that we not take forgiving for granted, but instead that we celebrate when it happens. Love demands that we stand by the road every day watching for each other, welcoming each other home.

At that Mass, I listened to Fr. Rich talk about forgiveness in the Gospel, and I realized that being married to Neil had taught me to stand in a place of forgiveness. In fact, reconcilication is the most critical work of the first years of marriage, and if a couple does it well, it becomes the work and the gift of a lifetime.

One of the graces present in the sacrament of marriage is the grace of healing and forgiveness. When we come to marriage we each bring our histories – healed or broken, reflected upon or repressed – to our life together. Our vocation is to help each other become fully human. This means finding a way to share hurts, to risk allowing the other person to know us so intimately that we are willing to open up old wounds and allow God to heal them through each other. Marriage at its best creates a safe space where healing and forgiveness can take place. It offers the possibility of having a companion to share the journey, someone to will help us to dig a litter deeper, to reflect more fully.

One of the best parts of being forgiven is the freedom it brings. Jesus taught us to ask for forgiveness when he taught us to pray. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" invites God to forgive us as we forgive.

Another way to look at it is to say, loose the cords that bind us as we have released the strands we hold of another's guilt. In marriage we can hold each other fast, or we can release each other to grow toward wholeness. It is always a choice!

Early in our marriage, Neil and I didn't know how to free each other. We had grown up in homes where feelings were not shared, and where reconciling was difficult. In my home it was not safe to express anger. In Neil's home disagreement could lead to estrangement. Because we brought these broken places to our marriage, we found ourselves unable to have healthy conflict and to move to reconciliation. Our joy in each other changed to distance, and living together became a strain. I wanted to leave, but I was too scared, so I picked fights, threw tantrums, and in general made Neil's life miserable. One evening I asked him, "Why do you put up with this? Why don't you just leave?" Neil grabbed my arms and said, "Don't you know, you are worth waiting for?"

I didn't know. I didn't think I was worth much at all. But Neil seemed to think so, and somewhere deep inside I felt hope. And hope, once the cords are loosed, will grow. Neil gave me a gift of forgiveness with his words, and with that gift I could begin to forgive myself. And it is a gift that keeps on giving.

When our second son was going through a rough time in his teens, he yelled at me, "Why do you and Dad put up with me? Why don't you throw me out?" I heard myself in those words, and I hear Neil in my response,"Don't you know you are worth waiting for?" The gift had come full circle. When we are forgiven and healed we are able to see our true selves, the beloved of God, and because we know it, we can share it.

Because of the things that Neil and I encountered on our road together, I have learned to forgive myself, my parents, uncontrolled events, God, our children, and Neil.

A friend of mine says that the concept of "forgive and forget" comes from chivalry, not from Scripture, and she described forgiving this way: "You know you have forgiven when you can remember the incident but not relive the feelings".

I would add one more piece to her definition: You have forgiven when you are able to bless the incident. It is easy to bless the good things in life, but when I remember the times I have been hurt and am able to see the blessing that came from it, I know I have been healed. It is in the blessing that the pain becomes a gift.