

The 4th Sunday in Lent: Holy Trinity Church: March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32: *You are forgiven. Can you forgive yourself?*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

This Gospel story from Luke is my absolute favorite. Yes indeed, it is the story of the Prodigal Son. It gives me goose bumps, every time I read of a young man who wanted to make a major change in his life. He didn't want to change his name. Instead, he wanted to get away from his family and his hometown and make a new life for himself in a faraway place. Even if that meant hurting the people he loved the most. Even if that meant burning bridges and losing his way. Even if that meant ending up in a place he never imagined he would be.

Wouldn't it be great if every story of being lost had a happy ending? And a lot of them do. But sometimes a trip to a faraway place takes us away from our sense of self, our sense of security, our source of strength. Sometimes a trip to a faraway place ends in brokenness or loss or regret.

If you were recruited for a study, what would you list as your ten biggest life decisions so far? It's fascinating to think about. Now, rank the decisions according to how often certain decisions, how significant the decisions were during your lives, and the emotions connected to the decisions. I think it is interesting because of what it says about the decisions we regret. The most enduring regrets in our lives result from decisions that move you further from the ideal person that you want to be. That makes sense, doesn't it? So, here is the rub, have you forgiven yourself? Think about it. Have you forgiven yourself? Can you forgive ?

My sisters and brothers, the most enduring regrets in life result from decisions that move you further from the ideal person that you want to be.

I think it's important to point out before I jump into the story of the Prodigal Son today that we have all made decisions that have moved us further from the ideal person we want to be. We have all made decisions that have moved us further from the ideal person God made us to be. That's exactly what sin is: moving away from God's perfect character and perfect will. St. Paul says in Romans 3: 23 reads, ". . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. . ." So, today's story is good news for all of us.

It's about a son who rebels against his family. He asks for his share of the family inheritance, so he can go off to a distant country and start a new life. The end result was he squandered his fortune in wild living and ended up broke and alone in a foreign land. When a severe famine spread throughout the whole country, the young man became desperate and hired himself out to a pig farmer just to keep from starving to death. Feeding pigs was rock-bottom, the most shameful job a young Jewish man could have work. The son in Jesus' story had rejected his father, lost his inheritance, and brought shame on his entire household. According to Old Testament custom, he was worthy of death.

This is one of Jesus' most famous stories. But Jesus' stories are never just about the story. Every story Jesus told is an introduction to God's heart. If you have ever wanted to know what God is like, then this story is for you. And if you truly want to understand the nature of God's heart, then always look at who is Jesus' audience. You know, Jesus never just told a story to entertain or instruct. Jesus told stories to draw people closer to God. So, he was very careful to choose the right story for the right audience.

So, our story begins with the words, "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the

law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ Then Jesus told them this parable. . .”

What do these verses tell us about God’s heart? Jesus is telling his audience of outcasts, “God welcomes you my sisters and brothers.” You are important to me. Not as a project or a charity case. As a friend. “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Dr. Paul Tournier was a Swiss physician, counselor and author who became famous for his books on patient care. Dr. Tournier believed that physical, emotional and spiritual health were interconnected, and he focused on addressing the whole patient in his medical practice. His methods were so effective that doctors came from all over the world to learn from him.

Dr. Tournier once wrote, “It is a little embarrassing for students to come over and study my ‘techniques.’ They always go away disappointed because all I do is accept people.” That’s interesting, don’t you think? “All I do is accept people.

My sisters and brothers, there is healing in acceptance. Jesus’ interactions with others were remarkably open. He noticed people whom others overlooked. He touched people who were lepers, the unclean, the Gentiles and those judged untouchables. Jesus had no walls of acceptability around him.

And this openness caused the local religious leaders to view him with suspicion and contempt. Even today, we struggle to just accept and love people as they are. Even today, that kind of love is radical. If God loves and forgives you, don't you think it is imperative to forgive yourself? Think about it. Link your mind to your heart and your soul and forgive yourself.

In 1989, Mother Teresa visited Phoenix, Arizona, to open a homeless shelter. There was a huge celebration in the city of Phoenix to welcome her, with crowds packing the local Veterans Memorial Coliseum to hear her speak. She was also invited to do a radio interview on Phoenix's largest radio station, KTAR. Before the interview, the radio host asked Mother Teresa if there was anything he could do to help her work. He was accustomed to lending his celebrity to various charities or making donations to good causes. But that's not what Mother Teresa wanted from him. Instead, she said, "Yes, there is. Find somebody nobody else loves and love them." Find somebody nobody else loves and love them. That's how Jesus lived his life. Jesus found the people nobody else loved, the people who had been told that God couldn't love them, and he loved them. Jesus made them the center of his attention. Jesus made them the good guys in his stories. That's the whole reason he was telling this story.

Another story to tell you about a man named Ron Baptiste. Baptiste was a biker and a member of the Hell's Angels. He became a Christian while serving a stint in prison. When he got out of prison, he couldn't find a church where he felt comfortable. So, Baptiste started his own church, Covenant Confirmers Ministries, near Nashville, Tennessee. The Covenant's members included former addicts, gang members, prostitutes, and even a local police sergeant. Tommy Hollingsworth, a Covenant member who also spent time in prison, says of his church, "You don't have to clean up. You just get connected to God. Anybody is welcome here. Anybody."

My sisters and brothers get connected to God. That was the point of every one of Jesus' stories and parables. That was the point of his life. That's what led him to the cross, just to connect us with God. SO, what does this story tell us about God? First and foremost, it tells us that we are welcomed. We are loved by God who loves us beyond our wildest imaginations.

The second thing Jesus is telling his audience of outcasts that God is waiting for us to accept God's loving forgiveness and then to forgive and love yourself. We are all children of God. Jesus continues with his story: The son in this story is starving and desperate. So, he decides to head home and beg for mercy. He knew he had destroyed any chance of rejoining his family. He

had destroyed any chance for forgiveness. But he thought to himself, “I’ll confess my sin to my father, and I’ll ask him to take me on as a hired servant.” If you have ever thought you have gone so far away from God’s ideals that you are no longer worthy to be called God’s child, then you understand the younger son’s decision.

Then Jesus says, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” The father who had been rejected. The father who had been shamed by his son’s actions. That father was standing at the window waiting for his son to come home. That’s how he saw him when he was still a long way off. And the father didn’t wait for his son to make the long journey to his doorstep. He didn’t wait for his son to repent or apologize. He didn’t wait to see the red, swollen, tear-filled eyes or the young face now hardened and haggard from hunger and shame. While the son was still a long way off, the father ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

A story of a five-year-old boy who had made a ceramic dish as a Christmas gift for his parents. As the boy gathered up his things to go home on the last day of winter term, the wrapped gift slipped from the boy’s hands and hit the floor with a crunch. The boy froze, then burst into tears. He had ruined his

parents' very special handmade gift. The father tried to comfort the boy.

“Don't cry, Son. Don't cry. It doesn't make any difference.” But the mother lifted the boy up into her arms. She held him close as tears ran down her cheeks too. And when the boy finally calmed down, she picked up the gift and said gently, “Let's pick up the pieces and see what we can make out of what is left.” You see, God is waiting to welcome you home. God is waiting to restore you. No matter how far away you may have gone from God's character and God's will, God is saying through Jesus, “Let's pick up the pieces and see what we can make out of what is left.” And this isn't just a moment of restoration, it's a moment of celebration! Jesus' story ends with these words:

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.”

Here is the challenge for this 4th Sunday of Lent with a story of a teenage girl who rebelled against her family and became increasingly estranged from them. One night, the daughter was arrested for drunk driving, and the mother

had to pick her up from the local jail. That was one long, silent car ride home. The daughter could only imagine all the angry words her mother must be holding inside as they drove home. The next day, the mother presented her daughter with a small gift-wrapped box. Inside was a rock. The daughter rolled her eyes. “Cute, Mom,” Said the daughter, “What’s it for?” “Read the card,” her mother said. Inside was a card that read, “This rock is more than 200,000,000 years old. That is how long it will take before I give up on you.” God is never giving up on you. You are accepted. You are loved. You are welcomed, and you are waited for. That was the message of Jesus’ life and the motivation for his death to show us that God would give everything He has to save us and restore us and bring us home again. Can you trust your life to a God like that? Can you connect to God? Can you forgive yourself and be at peace with God and yourself? I pray for you that today is the day you commit your life to God. I pray that you come home to the God who is running down the road to meet you with wide open arms loved, forgiven and forgiven yourself. AMEN!