

**THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION**  
**LUKE 15: 1-3, 11B-32; 2 CORINTHIANS 5: 16-21**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT**  
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**Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32**

*15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable: 11 ... "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "*

The Apostle Paul builds on the message of our gospel lesson. If we are in Christ, Paul said we will see ourselves and see others in a new way. According to Paul, God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Just as the father loved his two sons in the parable, we are called to love others in Christ's name. Later in this service we will commission a Stephen Minister with the charge to love others by being a Christian friend who listens, but we are all called to be ambassadors for Christ. Listen for God's Word to you and to me from **2 Corinthians 5: 16-21**.

*16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. <sup>17</sup>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>that is, in*

*Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.<sup>20</sup> So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making God's appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.<sup>21</sup> For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Thanks be to God for the reading of this holy Word. Please pray with me. O Lord, you know our hearts and minds, and you welcome us home with open arms. Help us discern whatever it is that keeps us from experiencing your love and sharing that love with others. Open our hearts to receive your love so that we love ourselves and love others as ambassadors for Christ. Prepare us through your word read and proclaimed for the ministry of reconciliation in our own time and place. Inspire us by the power of your Spirit. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

We often refer to our gospel lesson as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This is not the way Jesus introduced it. Jesus said it was a story about a father and two sons. It is a story of a father who offered unconditional love and longed to be reconciled to his sons, both of whom were lost. If we are ambassadors of Christ engaged in the ministry of reconciliation, we can learn much from the story about a father and his two sons.

Jesus told the parable in response to grumbling Pharisees who complained that Jesus ate with sinners. According to the scriptures, tax collectors and sinners were coming to hear Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees were offended that Jesus welcomed such people. The scribes and Pharisees sound a lot like the elder brother to me. They also sound like a woman who told me she checks out visitors in her church to see if they are the right kind of people.

The parable of the father and his two sons was the third in a series of familiar stories. The first told of a shepherd who left 99 sheep to go after one that was lost. The second story described a woman who searched for a lost coin and then invited her friends to celebrate when it was found. In all three stories, Jesus proclaims God's radical unconditional love, not only for the sinners, but also for the scribes and the Pharisees. God loves the least and the lost. God searches for them. When they are found, God celebrates.

Whether we personally identify with the sinners or the religious leaders, the younger son or the elder son this morning, all of us must experience God's love to be in Christ. God's arms are open wide to receive us, but Paul says there is more. Once we receive God's love, we are called to identify with the father in the story. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are charged with being God's open arms to the world – to real people that we meet today or tomorrow or next week– to people who need to experience the love of God in Jesus Christ.

God wants to appeal to others through us, but first we must be reconciled to God ourselves, not once but over and over again throughout our lives. When we get lost, we need to come home. According to Richard Foster ([Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home](#), 1) *the heart of God is an open wound of love. God aches over our distance and preoccupation. God mourns that we do not draw near to him. God grieves that we have forgotten him. God weeps over our muchness and manyness. God longs for our presence.*” Lent is a time to be received into God's embrace so that we may offer that embrace to others.

In Luke's parable the younger son sinned big time. Jesus gave an example that would shock those who heard it. What sins have we committed? Our sins may or may not be as glaring as the sins committed by the younger son, but sin of any kind has a way of separating us from God.

Brennan Manning, in his book Abba's Child (21), says *it is one thing to feel loved by God when our life is together and all our support systems are in place. Then self-acceptance is relatively easy...But what happens when life falls through the cracks?* What happens when addiction or an obsession takes control and we fail? What happens when our investments crash, our relationships fall apart, or when people turn against us? What happens when we lose our job or feel rejected by people we assumed were our friends? What happens when a loved one dies or life is unfair? Like the younger brother, we may be tempted to sin because it is accepted in the culture around us. We may act out because of feelings about ourselves, about the world and about God. Like the elder brother, sometimes the sins of others turn us away from God's love. We become angry or resentful.

Earlier this week I attended a program led by the Executive Director of GENaustin, an organization dedicated to helping middle school age girls develop healthy lives and a healthy self-image. When girls have low self-esteem, they often act out by engaging in immoral, unethical or illegal behavior, by bullying or by developing eating and emotional disorders. Statistics suggest that emotional bullying is increasing at a dramatic rate, partially because it is so easy now to send hurtful comments without personal accountability. Considering the negative pejorative dialogue among adults over the media today, I suppose we should not be surprised that many young girls and boys think it is OK to spread half-truths or lies.

One young girl in Austin was devastated when her friends sent images of her naked body over her own cell phone. She was taking a shower at a sleep-over. She laid her cell phone down in the bathroom and did not realize what had happened until the next day. She was mocked and ridiculed. Texts messages called her fat and ugly. At school, kids looked the other way or laughed when she walked by. Her friends would not speak to her. Because the picture was sent on her phone, the principal suspended her. She was permitted to return after an appeal, but she became suicidal. Only after intervention by counselors and other kids, some of whom were volunteers with GENaustin, did the young girl begin to think she could survive and finally thrive. She now is a regular volunteer helping other young girls. She is an ambassador for Christ because others showed her God's love when times were tough.

I wish I could say this young girl's experience is unique, but it is not. On the ABC local news Friday night they talked about the many Facebook hate pages. If you hate this person, click here. A twelve-year-old from College Station was devastated. Facebook took down the page, but sin has ugly consequences. Cutting words and images fly over the social network. They hurt, and they separate people from God.

Substance abuse continues to separate all ages from God. For young teenagers, huffing inhalants is popular because they are available and often free. On ABC's evening news this week, one father spoke through his tears about his daughter, a high school honors student, who was found dead next to an air conditioning vent, which she removed so that she could huff the Freon. The father wondered if they set their expectations too high. He felt worthless.

According to Brennan Manning (23), Christians of all ages struggle with a sense of worthlessness at one time or another. When life gets difficult, whatever the reason, we are vulnerable. Like the younger son, we may act out with obvious sinful behavior. Like the elder son, we may wear a mask of indifference but carry resentment deep inside. Either way, we are separated from the God who loves us.

Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen (From Fear to Love: Lenten Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son 13-1) observed that the elder son found it more difficult to come home because he covered up his sin with a supposedly holy life. Nouwen said resentment is pernicious because it resides deep inside us. We may

not even realize it is there. Like the scribes and the Pharisees, we may be lost and not even know it – until God wants to throw a party, and we want no part of it.

Lent is time to examine our lives and acknowledge our sin, even if it is hidden deep inside. We examine our sin knowing that God our Father waits with open arms to embrace us. Do we have trouble seeing God as a loving Father this morning? Are we finding it hard to come home? Pastor James Howell played the piano for his young daughter's solo in a church talent show. She sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and he thought it was great. When she finished, he swooped her up, twirled her around and said, "Oh, Sarah, I love you." A church member later said, "I wish my father had done that." "You wished your father had played the piano?" Howell asked. "No," the woman replied. "I wish my father had loved me."

There are many things that happen in life that may keep us from recognizing and experiencing God's love. Luke's parable hints at the complexity of it all. The Good News is that God still waits with open arms. God loves us so much that God became flesh in Jesus Christ and died on a cross through no fault of his own so that we might experience God's love and share it with others.

My friends God has entrusted Christ's ministry of reconciliation to us, but we cannot love others unless we come home to God's arms of love, not once but throughout our lives. God wants to celebrate another homecoming. Are we ready to join the party?

Ann Weems describes us this way in her poem, "The Disciples" (Kneeling in Jerusalem, 27):

Hurting they came to him. Healed, they followed him.  
Grateful, they gave to him what they had and what they were.  
Blessed, they became a blessing and went out to all the world in his name.

Those who are hurt and healed, grateful and blessed still move among us in his name.

May God bless your ministry of reconciliation.