

Sermon March 10, 2013 Lent IV II Corinthians 5:16-21 Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
"Reconciliation and Renewal"

Children's Time – Have you ever milked a cow? Well, once upon a time there was a man who moved from the city to the country. He bought a cow, but he only milked it enough to get one cup of milk. He didn't want to take too much. Well, the next time he went to get some milk from the cow, the cow didn't have any, because the best way to get a cow to give milk is to take milk from her. That's the way it is with cows. But that's not the way it is with a lot of things, like Halloween candy. You eat it, and it's gone. If you get an allowance, spending it doesn't make more come, does it? The things PEOPLE give run out, but the things GOD gives us, like if you can play the piano or do math really well or write or play a sport, or God's love, don't run out at all and in fact get better and bigger the more you use them. There is enough of everything God gives; there is enough love for you and for every person in this world. So be sure to look for the gifts God has given you and don't be afraid to use them!

Paul's words: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view... If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."

Jesus changed things. For Paul, Jesus changed the way Paul looked at things. No longer was Paul able to regard anyone from a purely human point of view, because God had come into his life and the love of Christ controlled him. The way a human being is valued and esteemed was turned upside down, because in Christ Jesus all persons are new creations. For us today, this means that in Christ - as we seek to be led by His way - our regard for those persons who are different from us - the poor or the rich, the quick of mind or those who are very slow, the native American or the naturalized American, the Moslem or the Jew, the weak or the powerful - our way of looking at other people may be radically changed, made new.

New creations in Jesus Christ... All are invited to be children of God, reconciled, forgiven, accepted, for the price of adoption was paid in full by God's Son overcoming all the suffering and death this world can ever produce. Jesus overcame everything within and without that can keep us from God.

All this having been said, you may not feel so new. Or loved. Or loving. In fact, this whole sermon thus far may have made you feel completely left out, cold. And when it comes to no longer regarding people from a human point of view, I may not be the only one who totally flunks! I want to be nice and faithful to God, but I tend to be uncomfortably critical of others as well as myself. I'm the one who notices the spot on someone's shirt or who catches the misspelled word in someone else's writing.... I am quick to feel it when someone doesn't seem to like me... I am too human in my view of others. You may be, too... We are flawed human beings. We are forever holding grudges and comparing ourselves to others...

It is perhaps for this reason that we are given the Gospel lesson, the familiar story told by Jesus which is usually given the title, "The Prodigal Son." The context: the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling over the fact that Jesus was associating with tax collectors and others they considered to be sinners. So Jesus told three stories, the story of the lost coin being found, the story of the lost

sheep being found, and this story.

This story was Jesus' way of drawing a picture of God's gracious love for God's sons and daughters... It shows God's love acting in surprising ways; it touches all who hear it with emotions concerning a child's "coming home" and an older brother feeling cheated by the gracious treatment of the formerly wayward brother... This story challenges the hearer to a new point of view because it doesn't end with everything peaceful and resolved. The older brother does not go inside and make up with his brother.

Though it's usually called the parable of the Prodigal Son, but it probably can more accurately be called "The Story of the Loving Father." How appropriate that the name is misfocused: for often in life we tend to overlook God's love, and instead focus on ourselves and the titles we would claim for our lives: "This Hard Life," "My Disappointments," "Nobody Understands Me," "It's Not Fair," "How People Have Let Me Down," or, more positive perhaps, "Look At All I've Accomplished In Life!" Perhaps some of our stories have been given the wrong title... The message of the Gospel is that every person can have a life entitled, "God Really Does Love Me and Have a Claim on My Life!"

Back to the parable. The main character in the story, in terms of dramatic development, is the father. This having been said, it is usually easier for us to identify with the two sons, for the world in which we live is full of prodigal situations.

The younger son's experience in the far country was close to the experience of many people today: anxiety, fear, loneliness, physical need in the midst of a system which seems only to take and take and crush people into things; emptiness and dread gnawing at the center of one's being; anger and need to have control; and attempts to dull the pain through drugs or alcohol or sex. Like the younger son, we are often driven to be disconnected from ourselves. We become emotionally sick, or else assume that life is hell and that this is the way things have to be.

The older brother is also touchable for us. Lots of folks today are upstanding, productive members of society and community. They are able to provide well for their families, to accomplish much in their professions, and perhaps to make sizable financial contributions to church, synagogue or charity. Fine citizens. Hardworking. Law-abiding. But when they see others who cheat or don't work as hard but still get ahead of them, the unfairness hits. Why is this person prospering when he hasn't followed the rules? They are filled with resentment, anger and frustration.

In some way or another, we've probably been there. We've cried out that life is not fair, and we've resented how easily somebody else seems to have had it. We know the sense of injustice, the rigidity, and the way relationships can be destroyed by this.

The younger son wanted to break ties with his father. He asked for his inheritance - his share of his father's estate - early, and then he took it and squandered it on "loose" living. The 2013 equivalent of such an action would probably involve much more than simply money and moving away. The boy's action in Jesus' day carried with it the connotation that, in essence, the boy was declaring the

father already dead, at least to the boy. He didn't stay to support him in his old age. He refused to invest himself in the family business. He turned his back on his upbringing and went and wasted everything his father had given him.

There's nothing so unusual about the son or his actions, even when he finally "came to himself" and realized that he'd be better off as a hired hand on his daddy's ranch and decided to go back home. The unusual thing about the story is the father. The son had, in essence, told him to "drop dead," and yet the father was on the porch scanning the horizon, looking for his son to come back. He didn't remain the porch once he'd caught sight of the boy, either; which would have been customary for the day. Instead, the father ran down the road to welcome his boy home. No lecture, no excuses needed... The father wanted only to celebrate the return of his son.

He welcomed him back not as a hired servant, but as a son in full connection... "Bring my ring, robe, and shoes..." A slave had no shoes - a son did! And he placed them on his son and gave him symbols of his authority... The father did not accept his son's conditions of return, but instead immediately restored him to sonship without conditions.

It wasn't fair, not in our eyes, and certainly not in the eyes of the older brother. No lecture by Dad, no grounding, no punishment, no having to work to earn a place in the family... The pieces didn't add up, didn't fit into his world view... Just as the pieces didn't fit for the Jewish authorities of his day when Jesus accepted all the wrong people.

Author Frederick Beuchner calls the father's uncondemning joy at welcoming his son the gospel's marvelous comedy, God's unexpected, splendid joke. Beuchner goes on to comment on the elder son, "He is what Mark Twain called a good man in the worst sense of the word. He is a caricature of all that is joyless and petty and self-serving in all of us. The joke of it is that of course his father loves him even so, and has always loved him and will always love him, but the elder brother never noticed it because it was never love he was bucking for, but only his due. The fatted calf, the best Scotch, the hoedown could all have been his, too, any time he asked for them, except that he never thought to ask for them because he was too busy trying cheerlessly and religiously to earn them." (F. Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairytale*.)

The kindness and love of the father in the parable are made quite clear in his dealings with the older son, who was outside sulking and angry that his brother had been so well received. The father went out to him, and did not scold his son (as we might have expected), but instead assured him that they would always be together, and that all the father's estate was his. The father would not receive his son on terms of brokenness, but instead affirmed their wholeness as father and son. (pause)

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...." God offers us new life and relationship. Where we would focus on brokenness and what has gone before, God would offer us new opportunity.... Yes, we are prodigal. Yes, we doubt and turn away and act foolishly and forget who we are. Yes, we often resent the good fortune of others. But yes, God is yet running out to meet us when we even slightly and tentatively turn toward God. God is asking us to trust that there is enough love in God for everybody. It will not run out or get used up!

If you have ever doubted the depth and the genuineness of God's compassion and love for you, then this morning's Gospel was written for you. It is for all of us who have wondered whether God, if God really knows us – our negativities, our mixed motives, our selfish times, the things we want to keep hidden – can really want to have anything to do with us. This Gospel story shows us God's heart and how deeply God wants each of us to turn to him and let him be our heavenly Father.

Prodigal or dutiful; wandering or utterly attentive; in the wrong or in the right, we are loved, loved by God. And we are asked to dare to share this incredible love-message with others... To do so is to come home as one reconciled and willing to be part of God's work of bringing forth - even today - a new creation. May it be so in our lives. Amen.