

March 6, 2016 Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 2 Cor. 5:16-21 "Coming to Our Senses"

It was late November. The pastor answered the parsonage telephone. It was Sandra, daughter of very active members in the church. She was away for her first year of college; she had not been home since the start of the semester because her school was all the way across the country from her parents' home.

When the pastor answered, Sandra apologized for calling so late, then stammered, "I need help. I can't go home. I am flunking my courses, and I am also pregnant. I don't know what to do or where to go."

The pastor asked her, "Have you talked with your parents?" She responded, "I can't. I have let them down in every way. They will be so disappointed in me." She broke into sobs.

They will be so disappointed in me. Probably most of us can touch that...

Jesus told a story about a young man who demanded his inheritance from his still-living father and took the money and put as much distance between himself and his father as he could. He lived as he pleased for as long as he could, until his money ran out. Then he ended up feeding pigs who ate better than he did. We can imagine that the father waited, looking out from his porch every morning and every evening, hoping that his son would come to his senses and return home. Finally, he looked out and saw his son returning home. The father rushed out to welcome him home.

This parable is the last of a series of three stories Jesus told about things that are lost and found. A coin, a sheep, and a son. In all three the word "until" is the turning point. The woman swept the house UNTIL she found the coin; the shepherd looked for the lost sheep UNTIL he found it; the father waited UNTIL the son returned home. These parables are told in response to the religious authorities' criticism that Jesus was welcoming and even eating with sinners. Through his stories, Jesus told them that this is what life is about, for all of us, to be found by the One who considers us precious! We all get lost, but God waits to welcome us home. That's grace, undeserved welcome, unearned love. Sometimes it's hard to deal with grace.

The older brother sure had trouble! He had stayed with his father, was a dutiful son. When he saw what his father was doing, he wondered, about something good for the "good" son?

The younger son had basically told his father to drop dead, then taken the money and wasted all of it on what various translations term "loose living," "riotous living," "dissolute living," "sinful living." When the boy finally "came to himself" and realized that on any level home was better than what he was enduring, he worked on a speech and headed for home, ready to try to talk his father into taking him back as a servant. "Father I have sinned against you and heaven and am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me one of your servants."

It could have happened that way. The father could have listened to his son's speech and then said, "Well, it's about time! You have finally come to your senses! So now, take the earring out of your ear, get a hair cut, and early tomorrow morning I want you to start working. Your brother will show you how to collect manure. Supper is at 5:00, don't be late." The older brother might have

been satisfied with this version. But that is not the story Jesus told. The story by which we are invited to live our lives is far more of a challenge--it involves a celebration, it involves overcoming our demand for justice, it involves accepting a God who wants to forgive and welcome more than to judge and condemn.

Paul declared in his epistle: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 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."

Many of the people of Jesus' day could not bear the thought of God being merciful to "sinners," folks who fell outside the boundaries of what they believed was acceptable. They could see that those sinners were wasting their lives, not living up to the Law of God, and they could not understand why Jesus allowed such "losers" to take up his time. The religious folks of Jesus' day probably would have identified with the older brother, the one who faithfully attended to what needed to be done, who didn't waste his life on frivolities like his brother did. They could really understand the righteous anger of the older brother.

But in some ways, perhaps in Jesus' story the older brother was also wasting his life away. His wasting away wasn't obvious or dramatic like his brother's, but it was still tragic. While the younger brother wasted his life in crude, riotous living, the older one did so in mean, small, self-righteous living.

Listen to the insight of J. Ellsworth Kalas: "I have worked in rescue missions where I've seen how pathetically a human being can throw his or her life away, but I've also had the same feeling in tasteful, middle-class and upper middle-class homes. Is it really any more of a waste for an alcoholic to spend all he or she has on liquor than for a buy-a-holic to purchase hundreds of pairs of shoes or scores of pairs of slacks? Of course, someone answers; first, because the person who buys inordinate amounts of clothing can afford it, and second, because such buying won't put a person on Skid Row or into a drug treatment center. True, but it's a matter of values....It would seem that the deterioration of the soul that comes when we become absorbed with material things is as serious an illness as drug addition - perhaps worse, in that it isn't easily recognized and therefore goes untreated....

"One more word about the older brother, and perhaps the worst of all: He apparently didn't really know his father. He had grown up under his father's kindness and love, yet somehow he couldn't understand how his father could love the younger boy, or why he would want to celebrate his return. He called the other boy "your son" while the father tried to remind him that the boy was his brother. He could not understand his father's heart." (Source uncertain)

So what do we have here? The story of an eager, loving father who ran out to greet the son who had wounded him and wasted everything he'd been given but who finally came home. The eager father restored the boy to full status in the family and celebrated his return. The same father went out to his older son when he realized that he, too, was in trouble, and the story becomes less lovely. The

older son was having trouble in the spirit, trouble with jealousy, resentment, and self-righteousness. The father went out to him, and offered him the opportunity to join the party, to realize all the blessings in his life and to let go of the anger. We are not told whether or not the older brother was ever able to celebrate. Perhaps this was the real disappointment for the father, that his older son could not forgive and welcome home his own brother.

We may have times in our lives when we feel like the younger prodigal. We probably have times when we feel like the older son, unable to see our own blessings or to stand the resentment we feel toward someone else. At times like these, God's heart makes no sense to us. However we are prodigals, the promise of the Gospels is clear: the eager God comes out to his children, wherever we are, and invites us to come home and discover life again.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

Life can be tough; people can be hard to love. We all have some measure of pain and joy, disappointments, opportunities, and bad decisions. We let God down. We let ourselves down. We disappoint those who love us. But in the midst of it all, we belong to God. God knows who we really are, God knows who we like and don't like, and God understands what pleases us and what perplexes us. God knows what we pretend to be and what we're ashamed of. God invites us to come inside with all sorts of brothers and sisters and be reconciled, made new, and fed that which will really satisfy and sustain our lives, now and forever. What God offers is better than anything we can find anywhere else.

"I am flunking out and I am pregnant." Yes, she disappointed her parents very deeply. But they were able to let her come home and she and her baby found life again. Love triumphed over failure and shame.

May we all "come to our senses" and let God help us see God's claim on us and God's love for us, so that we may find ourselves strong enough to love ourselves, even the most unworthy parts of ourselves, and able to welcome and celebrate others. In the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, Amen.