

Sunday, March 14, 2021

4th Sunday of Lent

When it appeared that the U.S. Civil War was about to be won by the North over the South, President Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the southerners upon their surrender. The questioner was curious as to what form of vengeance Lincoln was planning because of their treasonous acts, including the declaration of war on the United States. Lincoln's response was, "I will treat them as if they had never been away."

That response seemed like an appropriate segue into our Gospel lesson for today. The parable of the Prodigal Son is one with which most Christians are familiar, but it seems that it might be more appropriately named the parable of the Loving Father. It is a parable of loss and rediscovery, the kind of loss that is experienced when a person, for whatever reason, becomes separated from God; when one chooses to turn his or her back on God and attempt to go it alone. And the rediscovery -- the being found -- occurs when that person decides to come back to God, asks for forgiveness, and works hard to rebuild and resume that blessed relationship.

There are numerous lessons and messages to be gleaned from this particular parable that can be usefully applied to us today, at least if we are honest with ourselves. As we read the parable, we are typically quick to harshly judge the younger brother, who demanded his inheritance, left home, and selfishly and recklessly spent all of his money. The reckless, wasteful spending of money is actually the definition of the adjective prodigal. What a terrible thing he did to his father and to his steadfast older brother. It is only natural that we would sympathize with the father, and feel sorry for the older son, who seemingly had every right to be furious with his kid brother.

Under Jewish law at that time, when there were two sons in a family, it was automatic that two-thirds of a father's estate would go to the older son, and one-third to the younger, and it was not unusual for a father to distribute the property before he died if he wanted to retire or was too old and frail to continue to work the land. But in that case, the expectation would be that both sons would remain home and manage the property together. So again, the anger of the older son toward his brother was understandable.

After the younger squandered all of his money, he ended up feeding pigs just to try to stay alive. Feeding pigs was an absolute no-no among Jews. "Cursed is he who feeds swine." It soon dawned on him that his father's servants back home were eating better than he was, so he decided to return home and ask to be hired as a servant so he might survive. Of course, as we know, not only did his father not even give him a chance to make such a request, but he welcomed him back with joy, with loving arms, and a celebratory feast. The total, unconditional forgiveness was immediate, and there were no recriminations of any kind leveled against his son. The boy was lost, and was then found; he was dead, but was once again among the living. And that called for a celebration.

It was then that the older son became the lost one. He was lost in his resentment, in his anger, in his jealousy, in his arrogance. His total lack of compassion, sympathy, and forgiveness

separated him from God. He would not even acknowledge that the younger boy was his brother, because notice in his rant to his father he referred to him as “your son,” and not as “my brother.” He had disowned him. And through it all, the older son really had lost nothing. He still had his two-thirds inheritance. But it also became clear that his years of work on the family farm was apparently considered by him to be nothing but drudgery, and not loving service to his father and his family, clearly taking for granted all that had been bestowed upon him. So the older son, just like the younger one, was also in dire need of forgiveness, and the conclusion of the parable makes it clear that this was likewise freely given to him by his father.

Again, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we can most likely think of many examples in our own lives when we behaved like both of these young men, times when we were guilty of the same behaviors that cause us to turn away from God, or to act in such a way that is completely counter to the way we know God would want us to behave. We can't help it. We cannot wash away, wish away, or pray away the sinfulness with which each of us was born.

Jesus told this parable, and two similar ones in the verses that are immediately before today's reading – the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin – for the Pharisees and scribes, those folks who went to the synagogue regularly, gave generously to the church, and always tried to do the right thing. These were the very people who were complaining that Jesus was spending too much time with sinners, the great unwashed. He was paying too much attention to people who seem to mess up on a daily basis, or who didn't even try to live a moral life. The Pharisees were enslaved by their resentment toward Jesus, much like the resentment of the older son toward his father for forgiving and allowing such a LOSER back into the family with no consequences. We, too, often behave like the Pharisees, as we mete out judgment of people who are not just like us, suggesting that we are somehow “better” than all of those “others.” Such judgment should be left entirely to God. Our judgment of others is just one more way that we reject and demean God, and in doing so we become lost.

Fully understanding the level of God's unconditional love, in its purest form, is something that is beyond our human grasp. But understanding it is not as important as gratefully accepting it and giving praise to God for granting it to us. For without that unconditional love, there would be no unconditional forgiveness, and we would thus all be literally doomed. We are not forgiven because we make ourselves forgivable or even because we have faith; we are forgiven for one reason only: because Jesus, God incarnate, died for our sins and our salvation. And just as God forgives *our* sins, we are to always try our best to forgive the sins of others.

The season of Lent in our church year is one of self-reflection, a practice that we as Christians should really try to do every day. That effort should include identification of the many and various ways we almost routinely stray from God, coupled with a daily effort to try our best to do better, which will always bring us back to God.

In just three weeks, we will remember the brutal death of Jesus and then celebrate his resurrection, which is without question God's greatest gift to humankind. For without that loving, selfless act, every single one of us would be forever lost, forever dead. Instead, we can always find a way back to God, who will accept us unconditionally, and we will be forever alive.

Amen

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32; March 14, 2021

Don Sincell