

March 27, 2022

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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“Love said not so” (Luke 15:11-32)

11 Then Jesus^[a] said, “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^[b] 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.’^[c] **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[d] 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.’”

I want to talk with you today about trusting the process. At times, we get eager. We try to hurry life up. We talk about this time next year, what we are going to do this summer, or next spring. I hear my sons often say “when I’m a teenager” and begin to share their dream of what life must be like as a big kid. And I get it. I have goals too. I have seasons in life I am anticipating. Hopes for what life will be like at particular milestones but it is important to be fully present in this

time and space. We can't microwave the process. As cliché as it is, it is true, that we should enjoy life. Take it one step at a time. Trust the process.

In our scripture today, we see a young man who has a tough time trusting the process. The younger son wants his destiny before he is fully capable of receiving it. This is someone who simply does not know what he does not know. His life of security and comfort bore him. He knows what is entitled to him eventually but has no interest in waiting on his destiny. He wants this destiny now. It's important to note that this destiny is a product of his own design. He does not want to merely replicate the pattern laid out for him; he wants to chart his own course and live life the way he intends it. He goes as far away as possible and lives life lavishly.

He splurges. The text does not go into detail but I imagine this young man indulging himself with little concern for tomorrow.

Eating the finest food available, purchasing the finest material goods, just running it up. And it is clear that this young man never considered the question best posed by the late, great Peter Tosh.

“Whatcha gonna do when your well runs dry?”

These good times as designed by the young man, have an expiration date. This destiny, as constructed by his own ambition, did not account for calamity as a byproduct. While indulging in excesses and pleasures, surely he never anticipated the sort of hunger that drives one to envy what the hogs are eating. He never anticipated, while feeling claustrophobic in the loving security of his father, that he would one day be this neglected.

He has hit rock bottom. Low to the point of invisibility. Yet we know, the story does not end here. And this should give us pause.

Pause to confess that we have misinterpreted the low points of life as final points. We’ve written people off as finished. Rendered them

invisible, when they are seen and known by God. When we engage with this text we are reminded once more that God does not make junk. We may find ourselves in our lowest points, we may think it's all over, yet unbeknownst to us, love is writing another chapter in our story.

This rock bottom that the prodigal son visits leaves him with nothing but his memories. Even when we go out there, are truly reckless, we can still remember. The prodigal son remembers who his Father is. He remembers how his Father supplies, and he turns around. How many of you can testify today that confession is truly the start? The prodigal son leans into the about face that God waits for all of us to make. The Lord makes it plain when speaking to his servant Solomon in 2 Chronicles, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will

forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” The prodigal son is not returning full of immature hubris; he has no delusions of grandeur.

His time away from home has humbled him. It is at this point that he is closer to his destiny than he could have ever imagined.

His father rejoices upon his return. He embraces and restores him. Although the father calls for a celebration we know that not everyone is happy about how things are going.

I believe that the older son’s behavior is a cautionary tale for us. He received his livelihood prematurely as well but did not squander it.

He seemed frustrated, even bitter and angry about the reception for his younger brother who did the wrong thing. I can’t help but see this parable and think about Jesus’ other parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the workers in the vineyard. The shepherd leaves the 99 for the one, the woman rejoices over the lost coin, and the workers who arrive in the last hour receive a full day’s wage. The

older brother may be fixated on what is deserved but his father, like our God, is operating in grace. Deserve is a hard word to deal with theologically. I'd venture to say if we were able to watch every action of our lives on a giant screen we would be less inclined to ask for what we deserve. Yet we receive grace. Instead of complaining about what someone doesn't deserve, let's give thanks that God's mercy and grace are new every morning.

And I understand the frustration this older brother has. We see people choose the wrong thing and we think about how we would never do that. But thanks be to God that we are not defined by our missteps. God continues to relentlessly pursue us. There is nothing you or I can do to earn God's love. There is no hope for us in and of ourselves. Our hope is in Christ. The kindness that we demonstrate, the love that we have, any and all of the fruits of the Spirit are there

as evidence of the work God is doing in us. Consider these words from William Barclay, “Because of what Jesus did, there opens out to the Christian a life no longer dominated by the flesh but by the Spirit of God, which fills a man with a power not his own. The penalty of the past is removed and strength for his future is assured.” Forgiving yourself because you have been forgiven. Step out of the shade of shame and walk in the Son’s light.

See, bitterness can corrupt. I remember praying for God to give me forgiveness. I knew that I was at risk of phoniness, in danger of proclaiming a hollow gospel if I did not walk in forgiveness. I prayed for forgiveness so much that it became a part of my daily routine.

From time to time I would imagine dry soil, almost like red clay and I’d see a tiller pulling up that soil, breaking its hardness. And I would see this image again and again. I didn’t correlate the two, my prayer and my vision until much later but I am confident that I am able to

demonstrate forgiveness because of the good work that the Lord has done in me. Matthew Henry once noted that "By the Spirit the law of love is written upon the heart, and though the righteousness of the law is not fulfilled by us, yet, blessed be God, it is fulfilled in us." I am free to walk in forgiveness because of the Spirit that dwells in me.

I believe that forgiveness is a central component of our faith. Through Christ we have been forgiven. How can we follow Him and not extend forgiveness toward others? I have no doubt that it is a process, a journey too arduous to complete on our own. But I am even more confident that it is one we can complete through yielding to the Spirit and forfeiting any claims to the captaincy of our lives.

Living a life free from the burden of our failures isn't done by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord. Let us seek the Lord daily. Ask for the Spirit to till our hearts and nourish us so that we bear the fruit that is pleasing in God's sight.

You may think there is more out there, outside of the destiny that God has provided for you, but go home. You may want to get it for yourself, but go home. God's plans for you continue to be exceedingly and abundantly above all that you could ask or think. Find rest in the good news that you are seen and known by the One who made us all. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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