

Sermons at Christ Church

Reaching Out in Faith.

Lent 3

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"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!'"

Two brothers who could lay claim to a part of their inheritance. Two brothers who have worked with their father all through their lives. Two brothers who remind us of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau-one brother makes the good choices and the other one, the not so good choices. Two brothers who remind us of every family and our own families-the family dynamics of dysfunction, jealousy, chaos, triumphs, excitements, pain, joy, and everything in-between. As parents, we often wonder how our children are so different from each other. But we try our best to love each child, not more than the other but differently. Because each child may have a different need, we respond to each need with a love that is unconditional and assures them that it doesn't matter how low they sink, they are still valued.

The accusation which necessitated this story was that Jesus was welcoming to sinners and tax collectors. Jesus responds to this accusation with this powerful story that resonates with everyone because this is a kind of trouble that has happened to many people we know and love.

In the story, the younger son asked for his share of inheritance, which his father graciously obliges. He then set off to a distant country in pursuit of freedom. But then trouble awaits. The grass isn't as green as he thought. One bad decision leads to another bad choice. In no time, he squanders all his inheritance and is left with nothing. The kind of confidence and determination with which he left home to seek new life and opportunities has dissipated and he's now left with nothing. In a way, it feels like graduating from college and grabbing a job with the government. You move cross country

to the DMV area and after a few months on your dream job, you are laid off. Like this poor son, you are left with nothing but to feed pigs to survive.

As he fed pigs, he “came to himself”. He had an epiphany, an awakening, a self-awareness through which he realized his sense of worth, not as one who is self-sufficient but as one who could depend on the generosity of his father. As a son, he was worth more than his present status; he was worth more than feeding pigs or eating their food.

Even if he thought his offense was more than he or his father could handle, he thought to himself, I am worth more than this!! It was this kind of self-affirmation, this sense of self-worth that generated the needed courage to go back home to his father, and plead for reconciliation.

There are two climaxes in the story for me, when all material evidence pointed to this man being at the lowest point was also the highest point. Because there in that moment is where a new sense of awareness emerged. And it is this new sense of awareness that unleashes the courage in us to see ourselves differently, this is when we begin to see ourselves the way we ought to see ourselves.

In telling the gospel story, Jesus draws a distinction between those who believe that following the law was the only means to God and those who believe in the boundless mercies of God.

Through this story, Jesus opens the window wide enough for us to appreciate a new understanding of who God is and how God functions in our lives. Jesus casts God in the image of a father who welcomes his reckless son, not because the father doesn’t care about the recklessness of the son, but that his recklessness was not enough to substitute his love for him. What mattered was the courage of the son to come back home. God’s boundless mercy makes it possible for God to welcome those who out of the depth of their sins reach out in courage to be reconciled with God.

The second climax was when the older son got angry that his father has laid the red carpet for his brother. He has worked so hard, he has been dutiful. He has done everything right, and made all the good choices. But he doesn’t feel rewarded for all the good work he has done. His sense is that his father should love him more than the younger son who squandered all the inheritance. His father should love him more because he hasn’t made any bad choices. That’s how you and I see the world. A world which rewards only good choices and punishes bad choices. And because we feel we don’t get rewarded for all the good choices that we make, we can’t even see beyond ourselves to support

those who are being rewarded for having the courage to recognize their failures and are on the path to fix them.

We sometimes forget the gift we learn from failure-that we sometimes have to fail in order to succeed.

There's a story of a young man who visited an old keymaker known for his wisdom. Sir, he said, I have tried everything but success still escapes me. What is the key to success? The keymaker smiled and handed him a blank metal key. This is your success. The young man looked at it confused. But it doesn't fit any lock. The keymaker chuckled, 'Exactly. No one is handed a ready-made key to success. You must shape it yourself through hard work, learning failure and persistence until it fits the door you want to open. The young man understood that success isn't found, it is crafted. Success is like a key that has been given to us, success is like an inheritance that has been given to us-we have to work at it.

In fact, one of the inheritances that we have received is the gift of freedom. God doesn't control how we use our freedom; either for good or for bad, we are to use it the best way we see fit. Some question this latitude. They would prefer that God both give the gift and control the use of the gift. But the question is, why would God give us a gift and also control the manner in which we use that gift? How then can we be accountable if we have no control over our gifts?

I learned that life has never been about finding your own perfect ready-made key, it is about knowing that every failure sharpens the key that you have. And every failure we go through in life is meant to teach us a lesson about three forms of grace; one, grace to ourselves-the acknowledgement that we may fail ourselves, and when we do, we should find the grace within ourselves to forgive ourselves. Two, grace to others-our ability to forgive ourselves makes it possible for us to forgive others because we can see ourselves in them. Third, grace from God-through God's grace, God forgives us, not because of who we are but simply because of God abundant grace.

It is this grace that the father demonstrates to both sons-both of whom needed to hear something different from the father. Not condemnation, but a kind of loving reassurance that each is valued, not matter how dutiful or reckless each has been.

Here a story to make you laugh: A Catholic priest is on his way to the Vatican and runs into an old childhood friend. My goodness Martha, how have you been? I could be better, said Martha. My

husband and I have been trying for fifteen years for a child but we haven't been successful. I am so sorry to hear that, said the priest. I will light a candle for you when I am in the Vatican. Martha thanks the priest and after chatting a little bit longer they parted ways.

Five years later, the priest is in his rectory eating his lunch when he heard a knock on the door. To his surprise when he opened the door was Martha's husband. I am so glad I found you, Father. Do you remember that candle you lit for Martha? Well, I just want to let you know that now I have a set of twins, a set of triplets and we are not pregnant with quadruplets. He then hands the priest an all-expenses paid ticket to Rome. "Oh my goodness, says the priest, your joy is my joy. You did not have to give me a thank you gift." Oh no, it is not a thank you, it is so you can blow out that damn candle.

It is not for lack of awareness that we don't reach out to be reconciled with God, it is because of the lack of courage-the strength of mind which is able to overcome anything that threatens the attainment of the highest good. Paul Tillich argues that "Courage is self-affirmation "inspite-of," that is in spite of that which tends to prevent the self from affirming itself." And to me, the self can only affirm itself when it is in union with God or reaches out to be in union with God because it recognizes how far off it is from God.

I learned that spirituality has everything to do with our state of consciousness. And a conscious mind is an awakened mind which is deeply aware of itself and its value. And this awakened mind knows to walk with God because that's how we grow in knowledge, understanding and self-awareness.

Which of the brothers would you prefer to be? The one that is lacking in mercy or the one in search of mercy?

The younger son didn't expect the father to welcome him with the red carpet, nor was the father supposed to. But the point is that there is joy in being found. And that's the joy the father sold to the older son. There's a deeper joy in knowing that someone-God values you, just the way you are. There's even much greater joy in knowing that God's grace abounds-and like the two brothers, we all need more than a little bit of it.

Amen.