

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Welcomed Home”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, March 31, 2019

**2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 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. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

**Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

*Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*

*So he told them this parable:*

*Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. 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. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 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! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’’ 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. 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.’ 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.*

*Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.’’*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our minds, our hearts, our faith, and our imaginations to you and to the power of your spirit. I pray that you would take all that we have rolling around inside of our minds, our worries, and our celebrations. I pray that you would take the words that we have read from the Scripture, the words that we offer in song and in prayer, and the words that you've laid upon my heart to share this morning. Touch, bless, and transform all of these desperate words into your Word, the word of Jesus Christ. And let that word feed us. Let the word of Christ guide us and challenge us. Let the word of Christ be our strength and our comfort. Most of all, let the word of Christ live richly within us so that we might be your people and let that word come out in what we say and more importantly, in what we do. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Anybody ever hear the story of the prodigal son before? Yeah. It's one of those stories that is so familiar, it's hard to kind of stop and see it or hear it again, and let it speak because we sort of have already worked out which figure we are in the story. For some of us, we identify with being the prodigal, the one who has gone off and tried to do our own thing, who set our own course, and maybe like someone I know who happens to preach in Kirkwood at the Presbyterian Church. You kind of come to you that moment in life like the son does where you kind of go, "Wait a minute. This isn't working." And so you have to deal with that. For some of us, we are that diligent eldest child. We have come to church every Sunday that we can remember. We read the Bible. We offer our prayers. We give to the church offering. We may even decide to give extra to the Building Together Forever campaign. We do whatever it is that we are supposed to do to be good people and the way we go. Some of us, and I hope that all of us, eventually come to that moment where we realize that we can be like the Father where we can stand on the porch of life and wait patiently and calmly and welcome back those people in our lives whether it be children or grandchildren or friends or neighbors. We can welcome back those people who we think have gone off the rails, so to speak. Without question, without interrogation, without anger, we can stand on the porch and welcome them home. As I spent time looking at this passage this week, I found myself trying to move metaphorically further and further and further away from it so that I could see the whole flow of it kind of before me. And I realized that in a very real sense, it plays out a narrative of what the Christian life might look like, that we have been born into blessing and grace whether it was our actual birth or our baptism. We have a moment of realizing that God loves us and cares for us and that everything is going to be okay. And then we begin to live our lives and do our thing. And we go off and try to establish ourselves. And we forget that God loves us and cares for us. And we come to that moment of going, "Wait a minute. This doesn't quite feel right anymore." And then we turn and we come back to God. We come back home. We come back to that father figure, who's there and who raises us up and wraps us up and kisses us and hugs us and says, "It's going to be okay." And then there's a party to celebrate our return. Each of us, as we go through the Christian life, are going to have different roles. In fact, some of us might be that eldest son who says, "Wait a minute. I've always done the right thing. How come I never get a party?"

But what I want to focus on today is really two facets of the story that really-- I don't know why, but they spoke to me this week and it's-- one of them is kind of just buried in the text. It's the line where it says that the youngest son after he had squandered everything and he was hungry and he was caring for the pigs and the pigs were eating better than he was, the text says, "Then he came to himself." And I was thinking about that like someone walked up and flicked him right between the eyes like, "Boom. You got to wake up." He came to himself. He just realized, "Wait. What have I done? I had all this good stuff at home. I had a family that loved me and cared for me. I had meaningful work to do. I had food to eat." But he had thrown all of that away to set his own course in life, and it failed miserably. And in that failure, he came to himself. And the image that came to me was of this younger son after he had fed the pigs and he's watching them with their snouts in the trough just devouring these peapods. And he's sitting there on a rock watching these pigs eat more than he's eating right now. He's hungry. And he just has this flash of awareness of everything that he had squandered, not just the property but the relationships, the love, the grace, the meaningful work, the future that he had before him. And he woke up. And I don't know about you and your journey, but I know in my life, I tried to hide my humiliations. I don't like looking back at my life and examining the failures. But what this phrase, he came to himself, sort of invites us to do is that it invites us to realize that in our failures in life, that just might be where we are most teachable. That might be when we are the softest and most receptive to allow God's grace through an insight to come to us and say, "Wait a minute. This is not the way and when we have that moment, and we think about all of those things. To me, one of the most courageous things that this young son does, after having that awareness, is that he decides to go home. He allows himself to be humiliated. He has no idea what kind of reception he's going to get when he walks up that road. He's preparing himself to be at the status of a hired hand, a worker, a nobody, in the eyes of his father. He has no idea how he'll be welcomed. And yet, he takes that humiliation. He honors it. He learns from it. And he goes home. Most of us love that idea of going home, but we don't like the idea of stopping and meditating on our humiliations, our failures, our shortcomings. Those times where we have done something that has caused harm to ourselves or to another. But this passage and this season invites all of us to realize that those moments are powerful if we're willing to spend time there. And to allow that wisdom to seep in and soften our hearts, to massage our souls if you will. To make sure that we do not end up hard-hearted. He came to himself. The other thing that really struck me this week about the passage was that sense that we have a lot in the church, just in general. That we, you and I as Christians, are always cast in the role of the one who's done something wrong if you will. We're the one didn't do something right. And our child is ill, and we're begging Jesus for help. We're the one who's blind and can't see. We're the one who's sitting by the pool and can't get up. We're always that character in the stories. And in this story, we have two choices. We're either the younger child, or we're the older child. We're either the diligent, perfect child, or we're the

squanderer. And both of those options are sort of laid before us in the passage like, "You've got to pick which one you're going to be." And then, you come back, and the person on the porch, the father, is always considered to be God's presence in Christ in the midst of this story, right? We go off. We squander what we have. We go, "Uh, oh." And then, we turn around, and we go home.

As we're going home, God sees us. Jesus sees us. Comes down the path. Scoops us up. Says, "Oh. My gosh. I've missed you. You're back. You were dead. Now, you're alive. Hallelujah. Let it be Easter." But as we continue in the Christian journey, I am convinced that we need to be the parent on the porch. We need to be the ones who can be patient and wait. We need to be the ones who see someone far off, and before they can explain themselves, we go and embrace them and kiss them. And say, "Come with me. Let's have a meal together." Be a part of what's happening. Be a part of the celebration. And to be honest, to have the patience of a parrot who is standing on the porch waiting is something that I'm not sure that I have. I think I could welcome someone back and hug them and give them a kiss. And then definitely I could go eat barbecue with them. I have no question about that. But the waiting part, not so sure.

The power of this was brought home to me in my prior call as the associate pastor in Washington State when I had a woman one day who came into my office and said, "I'd like to talk to you about my daughter." This woman was 34 years old. Her name was Brenda. She came in. She sat down after the initial conversation that she wanted to talk about her daughter. And she shared with me that her daughter, after graduating from high school, decided that she was going to be an actress. And she went to LA. And her mother had not heard from her for months. Word began to creep back to the mother through various sources that her daughter was having a hard time. There were concerns about drugs and the people that she was with. There was concern about whether or not she was living in her car or an apartment. All of these things were coming out in the story. I could feel myself getting more and more tense. And as I was getting tense and listening the story, I kind of woke up. And I looked at this woman sitting in front of me. And I realized she's not tense. So finally I had to ask. I said, "Brenda, how is it that you can tell me all these things about your daughter that you're so concerned about, yet you seem so calm?" And she said to me, "David, can you do math?" "Yeah. I can do math. What does that have to do with anything?" "Well, do the math. I'm 34. She's 18. I had her when I was 16. She is me. I've lived that life. But you know what? I came back. And look at me now?"

From the outside, every appearance about Brenda said she was a successful, nice lady just doing her thing. No questions about any of it. Because let's face it, none of us see all of our stories. We don't share it with people. She did not freely go around and say, "You know what? When I was in high school I got pregnant and had a child." But what she did do is she allowed that experience to humble her soul. And she is able to wait and pray and be patient because of what I would call an humiliation. So it seems to me that this passage invites us in the season of Lent to not run away from our humiliations but to allow them to teach us and open us to the grace that God can provide us. And it also invites us as we are humbled by our past failures to not quickly judge others. But instead to quickly run out and embrace them and kiss them and invite them to a meal and to tell them that they are okay. In this sense, we continue to embody the love of Christ to all people. Amen.