

Lost And Found

Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A New Creation

Our first reading, from 2 Corinthians has a couple big ideas which also feed into the ideas we'll look at together from our Gospel lesson this morning. The first, is Paul's statement, "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). When we let Jesus be King of us – He washes us clean and makes us new people. The other big idea is along the same lines, is that today we are representing Christ to the world. Paul says, "God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us," (2 Cor. 5:19-20).

The whole world watches us – watches how we live, how we treat each other, how we talk to and about others – and uses that to decide whether or not a relationship with Jesus Christ is worthwhile. It's a weighty thing to think about – the conduct of our lives being the litmus test the world uses to see whether or not a relationship with God really makes a difference, but there it is. Today in our Gospel lesson we're going to read what's probably a familiar parable to many of us – the Prodigal Son – and we'll look at it with two thoughts or questions in mind. How does this parable show the idea of being made new? And how well do the characters in the parable represent Christ to the world? If you brought your Bible or Bible app with you today, turn with me to Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32. I'm reading from the New International Version this morning.

Not What's Expected

By this point in Jesus' earthly ministry, He's got quite the following – but it's not the following that the political and religious establishment of the day expected Him to have. If we're being honest, it's not really the following that the political and religious establishment of today expect Jesus to have, either, is it? "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering to hear Him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This Man welcomes sinners and eats with them,'" Luke tells us (15:1-2). How many of you have experienced someone talking about you behind your back? Most of the time, you can tell when someone's doing that – they treat you a little differently than they used to, don't look you in the eye, you get a "vibe" from them. We understand that, and we're just plain ordinary folks – and here's Jesus, experiencing the same sort of thing, but He's more than just an ordinary human, He's fully God – He knows they're gossiping about Him. So He responds with a few parables, one of them being the story of the Prodigal, or Lost, Son.

Something we have to understand with this story is how unusual it is. We lose that in our culture today, and in the translation from the original Biblical languages into modern-day English. “The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them,” Luke records Jesus say in verse 12 of our text. To parents today, that doesn’t sound so bad, does it? We want to give our children our very best. In the culture when this story was first told, such a statement by a child to a parent was unheard of. Basically, this younger son is saying to his dad, “Drop dead, Dad, I want my share of your money, and I want it right now!” You parents out there, how would you respond to that? I know how I’d respond – and how my parents would have responded, if I would have been bodacious enough to say such a thing to them as a 20-something year old!

Young people, you’ve maybe had some disagreement with your folks, right? And probably they’ve used the line, or something similar, “As long as you live in this house...” You’ve heard that before, right? I heard that, too, as a kid. Your folks probably heard it, too. Well, apparently, this young man heard it, too. So what’s he do? “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living,” (verse 13). He doesn’t want to stay a moment longer under his father’s authority than he absolutely has to. He’s rebellious. He wants to get out of Dodge, so to speak. He’s the instant gratification-seeking Burger King commercial “have it your way” poster child.

Going from Squandering to Squalor

So for awhile, he lived the high life, I suppose. And then something happened, maybe something similar to a COVID-related supply chain issue, or gas-price hikes because of the international embargo on Russian oil. “After he spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need,” (verse 14). He went from living the high-life with his head in the clouds, to being a low-life, impoverished nobody. What do you do when you need money? Go get a job – and he did! “So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs,” (verse 15). Friends, that would have certainly been a humbling experience for a Jew. Pigs were probably the worst domesticated animal a good Jew could possibly be around because they were identified in the Law as an unclean animal – you weren’t supposed to have any contact with them, or even eat them because they made you “unclean,” too. You are what you eat, after all, right?

So the younger son’s financially ruined, he’s gone from maybe being a billionaire or millionaire, or several thousands of dollars anyhow, to not having two nickels to rub together. And to add injury to insult – he wants something to eat. “He longed to fill his stomach with the pods the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything,” (verse 16) Jesus tells us. I envision this guy, standing ankle deep in the grime and muck of the pig pen, barefoot, with ragged clothes, and he’s got less to his name now than the old widow did who threw the two mites into the offering plate at the temple in Jerusalem.

The guy's in bad shape – all the way around – and realizes it when he decides to go back home and tell his dad he's messed up.

Notice what Scripture records the younger son's thought process to be – "I'll set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men," (verses 18-19). So he sets off, and heads back home. You know, I've read this story many times over the years. It hits real close to home. I have two prodigal children of my own. In June, it'll be ten years since I've seen Kayleigh or Hunter. Some of you remember them being here as little kids ten, fifteen, or even twenty years ago. It's hard being a parent, having children you love, who have no desire to have contact with you. I send cards and texts, and used to try to call them but they never answer. So I spend a lot of time praying for them, about our situation – our broken relationship – but most of all that they would know Jesus as King of them, so that perhaps, in eternity there might be reconciliation between us. I hope reconciliation comes sooner than that.

Compassion-Filled Father

"So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him," (verse 20). That's exactly what loving parents do with their children – even if we don't agree with the decisions they make or the way they live their lives. We love them anyhow. When we see them coming, we rush to meet and greet them. This father in the prodigal son story is an exemplary parent. It's the same thing God does for us, too.

He rushes to meet us where we are – He shows us His love. I'll come back to this in a minute. First though, notice what words the son gets out – because it's slightly different than what he'd previously decided he would say. The son says, "Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son," (verse 21). The son has a good sense of the reality of the situation. He wrote his family off, packed up and moved away, and now he's not worthy – there's nothing left there for him. He gets it. But before he can make the request to be a hired servant – see he never gets out that whole line of thought because his dad cuts him off – the father tells the servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate," (verses 22 and 23).

Why does the father of this wayward son do this? Why do we do it as parents, when our prodigal children come back to us? "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found," the father in the parable tells us in verse 24. Friends, that's us. We're the sons and daughters – we're the prodigals, too – we were dead to God in our sin, and rather than leaving us there, He rushes out – in the flesh – and takes our sin onto Himself at the cross. Jesus Christ cleans us up. He gives us a

new robe – salvation – washed in His precious blood. He makes us a new creature in His eyes. We literally become a new person to Him because of what He does – not because of anything we do, we’re simply the recipients of this beautiful gift of grace He’s given us.

Cleaned Up, Made New

You’ve seen weddings. What is the visible, tangible thing the bride and groom give each other to show they’re making a life-long commitment to each other? A ring. They exchange rings. Jesus takes our sin from us at the cross, and exchanges it with His righteousness and holiness. He rushes to meet us where we are, yet loves us enough to not leave us there. When we let Him be King of us, He puts His own Holy Spirit inside us to lead us. It’s a seal that shows we are His, just like the ring the couple exchange in a wedding shows they belong to each other. The father in the parable puts his ring on the finger of this lost son who’s been found, and tells all the servants, “this is my son.” God gives us His very best – He sends us Jesus to clean us up and make us right with Himself, and then sends His own Holy Spirit to dwell within us. He makes us a new creation – from the inside-out! I think we’ve pretty much covered how God makes us new creations in Christ. Now let’s look at how well the characters portray Christ to the world.

Obviously, the younger son doesn’t portray Christ – he’s more like us in the story. He’s flawed – he’s messed up, and knows it. He repents. He returns to the father – that exemplary Parent we see most fully in the love our Heavenly Father displays through His Son’s crucifixion and death on the cross, and the promise He gives through the resurrection and the in-dwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Sibling Rivalry

I want to spend the rest of our time talking about the older brother, and his interaction with his father today. We see some sibling rivalry in this parable. The older son comes along, after a long day of work in the field, and hears the party, and asks one of the servants what’s happening. “Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound,’” (verse 27). As expected, jealousy comes into play. “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him,” (verse 28). Some of you have brothers and sisters. We don’t always get along with them, do we? I’ve seen families ripped apart after the death of their parents. The kids start going through things, looking at wills and stuff, and there’s potential for people to get really hurt. Besides losing the parents, there can be a lot of hearts broken by what goes down after the fact.

The dad in the parable is standing outside the house pleading with this older son to come inside – to come in and see his little brother. Notice how he answers his dad. “But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate

with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!” (verses 29-30). I’ve never been involved in agriculture – and I could be wrong – but because of the way this conversation is framed, I suspect that a calf may be of more value to a farmer than a goat. This older son says he’s “been slaving” for his dad. That’s a pretty strong statement! The older son even goes so far as to call his little brother “this son of yours,” rather than “my younger brother.” It’s very clear that the guy doesn’t care about his younger brother, and that’s really a sad situation to be in.

I told you earlier this morning that I’ve read this parable multiple times. Several years ago I looked at this same text with our Red Letter Men’s group one Saturday morning when John had to work. A conversation came up towards the end of that morning with regards to the older brother. The question, as I understood it was along the lines of an economic or financial concern of, “What happened to the older brother because of the restoration of the younger son by the father?” At the time, I answered, “I don’t know.” We don’t know what happened to him. The story ends pretty abruptly, and Jesus switches into another parable at the beginning of Luke 16.

It’s All Yours

In studying the Scripture just this week though, something hit me, that I had never caught before. Verse 31 says, “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’” I guess I’d read that before – or read over that before – and just kind-of assumed that it’s the father’s way of being reconciliatory with the older boy, because it is. But there’s more being told here than we grasp because of our culture today, which the first hearers of this would have completely understood.

Remember back at the beginning of the story, where in verse 12 it says, “the younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them?” The dad’s already given everything he owned to the sons – to both sons. When he gave to the younger son, he also gave to the older son. And in that culture, when an estate was divided, the older son received double the inheritance that the younger son received. The dad just retained the income from the property until he died, then all the income would have also went to the older son.

“Everything I have is yours,” the dad says. It all belongs to the older brother. Even the robe, the ring, the sandals, the fattened calf – and even the young goat the older son wanted for a party with his friends. He just didn’t have eyes opened to see it, or the mental thought processes to grasp it. Maybe he was so accustomed to living in the shadow of his father that he assumed it was all his dad’s because his dad was still living. But it’s all his to dispose of how he sees fit.

The Lost is Found

Friends, that's exactly what Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected does for us, too. He adopts us into God's own family, and makes us co-heirs – joint heirs – with Himself. Everything that Jesus gets from God the Father, He offers to us. We just have to have the faith and wherewithal to want to grasp it and truly let Him lead us. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing," Paul writes to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:7-8). Keep the faith, friends. Stay the course. Almighty God is true to His Word, and He will never let us down! Let Him lead, and let us be faithful followers. Amen!

"But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found," (verse 32) the dad says in the parable. I hope the older brother became a better image-bearer of Christ after the story ends than he's portrayed at the end of the passage. I hope his heart eventually softened towards his younger brother, and that he came to realize that his brother had been lost – he was dead in his sin – but was raised to life again and found in Christ, and looked after him – even as a hired worker – after his father died. I hope the Church has hearts softened to recognize those lost brothers and sisters – dead in their sins – yet being renewed and raised to life again, and found, in Jesus Christ. As followers and lovers of Jesus Christ, I hope our hearts are also soft enough to recognize and care for them!

Prayer: Eternal Lover of our wayward race, we praise You for Your ever-open door. You open Your arms to accept us even before we turn to meet Your welcome; You invite us to forgiveness even before our hearts are softened to repentance. Hold us before the image of our humanity made new, that we would live in Jesus Christ, the Model and Pioneer of Your new creation. Amen.