

Selfies

Welcome to week four of our Lenten series, “Reframed.” If you’re just joining us, we’ve been looking at reframing our lives through Scripture as we journey towards the empty tomb of Easter. During the first week, we saw a “Panoramic Perspective,” through Scripture as Jesus faced temptation in the wilderness. In week two, we were invited to “Get in the Picture,” as we celebrated that we all belong in God’s family. And last week, we – like the barren fig tree – were offered a “Retake,” or second chance to thrive.

This brings us to today. Today is all about our selfies. How many of you like to take selfies? Do you know there are a few tricks to taking a good selfie? First, if the camera is higher, and you look up at it, you can tighten up that jawline a little bit. It’s really a thing.

Second, you want to make sure there is adequate lighting on your face to get the best lighting and color possible. Third, be aware of what’s behind you. Is the background distracting? Are things in order? Finally, keep those eyes open, and smile big! Teeth or no teeth? That’s up to you to decide!

Selfies can be a lot of fun, but when the camera is pointed in our direction, we miss what’s happening all around us. There are tragic stories of people falling off the sides of cliffs – for instance, the edge of the Grand Canyon – or being attacked by animals, as they try to get the perfect selfies. If we’re not careful, our self-centeredness results in harm to us and others. In today’s Gospel lesson, we explore a story about how self-centeredness wrecked a family. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32. **Read Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.**

The Prodigal Son

This Scripture passage invites us to turn our camera around and reframe our thinking as we consider God’s bigger picture. In doing so, we begin the process of “Perfecting Our Selfie.” In the fifteenth chapter of Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells three stories about something lost being found and how being found is always worth celebrating. The stories build on each other. The first two parables about the coin and the sheep set up the experience the younger son will have – and these stories speak particularly to the tax collectors and sinners listening to Jesus. They hear the good word that all hope for them is not lost – that they can be welcomed back into God’s family – and even celebrated.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law don’t like seeing Jesus hanging out with what they consider to be the “riff-raff.” It’s in verse 11 where the story of the Prodigal

Son begins. To paraphrase that story, a father has two sons and the younger of the two asks for his inheritance so that he may go and live his life on his own terms. The son leaves his family, and quickly finds himself in peril as he engages in a self-indulgent lifestyle filled with parties and wild living.

After he's squandered everything he has, he finds himself hungry and penniless. Verse 15 starts to lead the Prodigal Son story into new territory, as far as Jesus' parables go, at least for the Pharisees listening to it, because they may hear themselves echoed in the statements made later by the older brother. They resent the Teacher who celebrates sinners by dining at the table with them – and who sends all the wrong messages as far as they're concerned. The Pharisees' anger is much like the older son's anger that his younger brother is having a party thrown in his honor at the end of the story. What honor is there when you tell your father you'd rather he be dead so you can have your inheritance? I mean, that's what the younger son did.

Eating Pig Food

Things are actually much worse for the younger son than the older brother could imagine. He imagines his brother spending all his money on prostitutes – he tells us that in verse 30 – but he fails to recognize that his younger brother's life has fallen so far apart that he was desperate enough to break basic Jewish customs and laws in order to even have the chance to eat the pods which the unclean animals ate. A lifestyle of debauchery is a cry for help, but the dehumanizing realization that a person's livestock are treated better than a human being is an altogether worse blow. Nothing the younger brother has been through is something the older brother wants to have for himself, yet he resents him anyways.

Going back to the younger son, when he's at his lowest, he realizes that his father's hired servants have it better than he does, and he decides to return home. Now, I'm not sure exactly where the repentance kicks in for the prodigal son. We're told, "when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!'" (Luke 15:17). This first thought that he has is cold, fact-based calculation. He needs food, and he knows the farmhands at his dad's place get fed.

Then he begins formulating a response – maybe it's more calculation to try to weasel his way back into his father's good graces – or maybe it's genuine repentance. He says, "I will 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 servants,'" (verses 18-19). Over time, I think there probably was some genuine repentance, some heartache and heartbreak on the younger son's part. At least it sounds that way.

I Shall Arise and Go Unto My Father

Once I got to junior high school and high school, the church I grew up in sent teens each summer to a week-long church camp, Camp Christian, outside Delaware, Ohio. I made a lot of friends – some I’m still in contact with – and learned a lot of stuff, primarily songs. One song dealt with the prodigal son. It had a great tune and was done as a three-part round. I haven’t been to camp in over twenty years, but can close my eyes, and hear all those voices raising that song up together, because it’s become a song of my heart. **(Sing, “I Shall Arise and Go Unto My Father”).**

I don’t think I’m surprising anyone in saying this, but I’m a prodigal son. Maybe you are, too. In my early adulthood I made a lot of mistakes – still reaping the consequences of some of those. Maybe some of you are in the same boat. Well, there’s a father in this story – the prodigal’s father sees him approaching from a long way off.

And the father runs to him and rejoices at his return. In fact, Jesus tells us, that the father throws a party to celebrate the return of the wayward son. When this happens, the older brother becomes frustrated. He complains to his father that what is happening is unfair. After all, the older brother followed the rules, did what he was supposed to, and never received so much as a small celebration like this from his father.

Resentful Older Brother

See friends, the older brother has resentment in his heart. The father explains to the older son that his brother who was lost is now found, and that having him back is worthy of a celebration. A homecoming or house-warming party. Although the younger son gets more of a bad rap because of his obvious obsession with self-indulgence, the older son is no less a prodigal than his little brother.

We don’t see dishonor and a wild lifestyle from him, but there’s still darkness and self-centeredness in his heart. Based on his response to his brother being back, we see anger, jealousy, and trash talking. He’s furious over the way his younger brother was honored and refuses to attend the party. In his mind, he’s been the one working so hard to earn his father’s blessing, not to mention his father’s possessions.

The problem is, the older son was working to gain something he already had. The father tells him, “everything I have is yours,” (verse 31). Not, “everything will be yours, someday.” Right now, in that moment, all of it was the older son’s. What does the older son really care about? Not family – he’s not willing to celebrate this occasion. Not his father – he refused to share his father’s joy and attend the reception, even after “his father went out and pleaded with him,” (verse 28). Through bittersweet tears, of having a lost son return, and a present son withdrawing, the father’s begging him to change his mind and come inside.

Perfecting Our Selfies

Clearly the only motivation the older son possessed was one and the same with his younger brother – he wanted his father’s possessions. “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,” (verse 29). There’s an entitlement mindset being revealed in the older son, which he can no longer hide. Basically, he’s telling his dad, “If anyone deserves a party, it’s me! What have I gotten? Nothing!”

And don’t miss this friends, the older son doesn’t seem interested in celebrating anything with his father – he mentions a young goat so he can celebrate with his friends. If he would have had the goat for a celebration, his dad wouldn’t have even been on his guest list. It’s easy for us to peg the younger brother as being the self-centered one, but both brothers had their proverbial cameras pointed at themselves in this story. How often is that true for us as well?

Both sons in this story had become so focused on what they wanted that they lost sight of what really mattered. The selfie was so close they couldn’t see past their own noses. There was no joy in that kind of life, and that is a message Jesus repeatedly drives home over the course of His public life and ministry. True joy arrives when we cross the threshold of selfishness into service. When “me” becomes “we,” and when “I” becomes “us.” If we really want to “Perfect our Selfies” – our selves – then we have to be “other” focused.

When we experience heartache and heartbreak, start spending time with God in the Scriptures and in prayer, and really start reflecting on our own lives – we recognize how we have been prodigals to Him – God comes running to us. He meets us on the road, embraces us in a bear hug, and holds us tight with His nail-pierced hands. And then He calls us to do the same thing. To be like the father in this parable. Always on the lookout for others, running to embrace them, and draw them into the celebration prepared for us in our Father’s house. May we be ready to embrace the joy that comes along with seeing the world as God sees it – with a heart that longs for all to join in the celebration of a Kingdom that has no end.

Prayer: Gracious Father, Who runs to meet us, welcomes us home, and invites us to join the feast, hear our songs and our prayers, of joy, of thanksgiving, of contrition, and despair. By Your Spirit lift our hearts so that we may praise You eternally. Through Jesus Christ, Your Son and our Savior. Amen.