

“Prodigal Father”

March 6th, 2016 ©
4th Sun. in Lent

Psalm 32

Luke 15:1-3,11^b-32

But when he came to himself he said,

*‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare,
but I perish here with hunger!’*

Luke 15:17

Let us pray... O God,

Just as the prodigal son’s father welcomed him home with an extravagant welcome,
in the same way you receive us with radical love and forgiveness.

May we be like you – as Christ was like you, keeping our hearts open
to positive potentials for change.

Amen

‘(W)hen he came to himself’... What a beautiful image we have in this verse
from the story about the Prodigal Son.

It suggests that he had a ‘born again’ experience –

that he made a decision to turn his life around and turn away from
that which was false and hurtful to himself.

Yet it is still hard to know if the Prodigal Son actually did have a change of heart
‘when he came to himself’.

Seems like he was still bargaining, still planning, still scheming, when he said,
‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare,
but I perish here with hunger!’

It seems like he still didn’t quite get it.

Yet even so, he did find his way onto the right road out of catastrophe.

It was a big step that would take him back home...

Have you ever been disappointed
in a loved one?

Have you ever been exasperated that –

after all you did for that child of yours, or brother or sister, or other relation,
and they still made up their own minds to do things their own way?

Fancy that... and don’t we make that mistake often enough –

that just because we love somebody, and they love us,
that we expect they are going to think like us

and choose to act like us, enjoy the same things like we do – vote like us?

Maybe if we remember to put the proverbial ‘shoe on the other foot’ –

that we might also remember how *we* were in yesteryear!

Maybe we were the ones who got ‘stuck in our ways’

and refused to ‘see the light’ as it were, failing to avoid those pitfalls

that others were telling us about – until we had to go through them.

Still it is hard to see someone make choices that you know

from your own experience will be troublesome.

Seems like some people have to take a beating before they understand the way to go,
but even then, that is no guarantee...

Willard, p.2

Confession is a great thing – Roman Catholicism had a great idea going with getting people to admit their faults and seek advice for making changes for the good, in the context of a safe pastoral relationship. Unfortunately, the institution of mandatory confession may not always be effective. Storyteller Jay O’Callahan tells about a trip the eye doctor when he was a child and having his eyes checked by that device with the alternating lenses. He said it was like ‘going to confession’ with the doctor saying: ‘Better, the same, or worse? Better, the same, or worse?’

The confessional priest is not expected to give advice, but to make a judgment and administer penance – or so popular perception is, about Roman Catholic confession. Do so many ‘Hail, Marys’ and so many ‘Our Fathers’, and you are good to go – until the next time.

Even so, the repetition of such devotional prayers is another great idea – and is similar to a monastic tradition called the ‘prayer of the heart’. The ‘prayer of the heart’ is the repetition of a prayer for thousands of times, until it becomes automatic in a person’s subconscious. This probably has its origins with the Apostle Paul’s guidance in I Thessalonians 5:17 to ‘pray without ceasing’.

Again, these are great ideas, but in their application, instituted over time, they can lose their effectiveness – except as they are recognized for their positive possibilities and re-application for present needs. I am reminded of a passage in the book, Angela’s Ashes, by Frank McCourt who wrote about his experiences as a young boy growing up in Ireland during the 1930s and ‘40s.

He was soon to have his First Confession when an older boy told him a dirty joke – and he was fretting about having to tell about this to the priest. All the other children would have normal sins to confess, like hitting a brother or sister, telling a lie, stealing a coin from mother, disobeying parents, or eating sausage on Friday, but he was convinced the priest would haul him out of the booth, drag him into the street, and expose him for public scorn.

He was so troubled that he went out to the staircase of his apartment building and sat down on the 7th step of the landing leading to his door. There, he consulted the ‘Angel of the Seventh Step’ – a manifestation of his childhood belief in his own sacred space. The Angel of the Seventh Step actually answered him, saying, ‘Fear not.’ He was confused by this and didn’t understand why the angel was talking backwards.

Willard, p.3

The Angel answered him again, saying,

Do not fear... Tell the priest your sin and you'll be forgiven.

Still he was frightened and confused about what to do,
and he resolved to ask his father.

Now, his father would appear to be one of the most
worthless characters in all of literature.

This was someone who had no job, but spent his time and money drinking in pubs
and going on long walks alone, leaving his wife Angela with pennies
to hold house and home together.

However, as useless as he was – he redeemed himself...

To his credit, he listened without judgment

when his little boy told him what was so troubling,

and then gave his son a word of advice and assurance:

(It's not a sin and (you) don't have to tell the priest.

[When the boy insists that the Angel told him to do this, his father replies:]

All right. Tell the priest if you like

but the Angel on the Seventh Step said that

only because you didn't tell me first.

Isn't it better to be able to tell your father your troubles

rather than an angel who is a light and a voice in your head?

[and the little boy answers,]'Tis, Dad.

<http://www.alvinisd.net/cms/lib03/TX01001897/Centricity/Domain/4005/Angelas%20Ashes%20PDF.pdf>

For that matter, there are “angels” of the 12th Step that have saved many lives
through the trusted fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous
and other such gatherings to help people come to terms
with their addictions, making the choice hourly and daily
to live a sober life.

The 12 Steps refers to 12 principles that serve as a guide to a life of sobriety –
among them being an awareness of a ‘Higher Power’
and the cathartic effect of truth-telling.

In the company of others who claim their addiction and in an atmosphere of
confidentiality, they are able to tell their story and admit their faults
without recrimination.

Outside of these meetings, a helper is assigned to be there for a person
available on call anytime, to listen and be encouraging
in those times of painful temptation.

Willard, p.4

I have seen how the Native American community celebrates an individual who has achieved sobriety for so many years, by the public ritual of 'picking up the Eagle feather' – that is what they call it.

This is done as a public event during a powwow as people are gathered in a circle, amidst drumming and singing and the person being honored for his sobriety, steps out into the middle to pick up an eagle feather and reclaim his dignity in the community.

We have this promise of a second chance for forgiveness in Christianity – 2nd, 3rd, 4th ... 7th, and 7 x a 7th chance through the extravagant welcome of God.

No matter who we are or where we are on our life's journey, we are encouraged to turn around and turn away from all that is false and hurtful and find welcome here in church.

This extravagant welcome was described by Jesus himself in the Parable of the Prodigal.

Usually we think of the prodigal as the younger son, but another way of interpreting this story, is that the father was also a prodigal – a prodigal because of his extravagant generosity in welcoming his irresponsible son home.

Should the father's actions be followed literally in life as a strategy for dealing with loved ones who have behaved foolishly, and then show up for help?

The father's behavior is extreme and we could certainly sympathize with the elder brother who was faithful throughout the years, serving the family's interests, yet without the reward that the prodigal son received.

Such a homecoming works, when there is a real change of heart – and a commitment to change in deed and not just word alone, is recognized and rewarded by God, as we heard in Psalm 32:5...

So I admitted my sin to you; I didn't conceal my guilt.

"I'll confess my sins to the Lord," is what I said.

Then you removed the guilt of my sin. Selah

This prodigal father demonstrated an 'extravagant welcome' not only when he outfitted his errant child with gifts and even sacrificed the prized calf for a feast, but this father goes out to the returning son while he was still a long ways off – the father had been watching for his return...

Willard, p.5

We can well understand how the eldest son reacts when he hears this –
he is incensed and refuses to join in on the festivities
and won't even come in from the fields to the house.

Again, the father goes out – this time to meet and reason with his elder son.
This is a beautiful image of a God who actively searches us out –
not only when we know we've been less than loving and done the wrong thing,
but also when we have done wrong and think we are doing right.

'God in Christ' or 'God through Christ' means
meeting us more than half way.

Like the prodigal father of Jesus' parable, God goes out to where we are
in order to reason with us and still receive us,
whether we understand or not, whether we get it or not.

We are expected to do the same –

though not at the exclusion of holding someone accountable.

The father would not be legally obligated to take the prodigal son back in –
and there was no mention of the financial arrangement from that point on.

So, we would expect some 'tough love' to apply.

Isn't that how God treats us, too? God does not let us off the hook of responsibility
while we remain in relationship with God 'in Christ'.

Irresponsible people should still be held accountable,
but loved just the same – and not abandoned.

We are to be prodigals like God, following Christ's example
by showing love, forgiveness, and acceptance,
while being intolerant only of evil...

The Protestant Church had a falling out centuries ago,
with its parent, the Roman Catholic Church.

Things are much improved as we Protestants can choose to benefit
from our Catholic heritage.

I have mentioned some examples from our parent tradition already,
like confession and devotional prayer.

To these, let me add a form of guided meditation
called the 'Examen of Consciousness'...

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of Man,

Walk with me through the events of this past day(past week.)

Thank you for this particular gift.

I celebrate your love when I was loving and when I was loved;

I celebrate your undefeated love when I was less than loving.

What grace am I being invited to ask for?

[And when you are ready, open your eyes...]

Amen

Our lesson from Psalm 32 appears to be in two parts, representing two voices – one represents a repentant sinner and the other the voice of God. The meaning of the word “Selah” is unknown, but is used several times in the sinner’s speech and seems to emphasize pausing to weigh or reflect upon what has just been said...

- [1] The one whose wrongdoing is forgiven, whose sin is covered over, is truly happy!
- [2] The one the Lord doesn’t consider guilty—
in whose spirit there is no dishonesty— that one is truly happy!
- [3] When I kept quiet, my bones wore out; I was groaning all day long—
every day, every night!—
- [4] because your hand was heavy upon me.
My energy was sapped as if in a summer drought. Selah
- [5] So I admitted my sin to you; I didn’t conceal my guilt.
“I’ll confess my sins to the Lord, ” is what I said.
Then you removed the guilt of my sin. Selah
- [6] That’s why all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times,
so that a great flood of water won’t reach them.
- [7] You are my secret hideout! You protect me from trouble.
You surround me with songs of rescue! Selah
- [8] I will instruct you and teach you about the direction you should go.
I’ll advise you and keep my eye on you.
- [9] Don’t be like some senseless horse or mule,
whose movement must be controlled with a bit and a bridle.
Don’t be anything like that!
- [10] The pain of the wicked is severe,
but faithful love surrounds the one who trusts the Lord.
- [11] You who are righteous, rejoice in the Lord and be glad!
All you whose hearts are right, sing out in joy!

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 15:1-3,11^b-32

^{15:1}Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

²And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying,
“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable:

¹¹And he said,

“There was a man who had two sons;

¹²and the younger of them said to his father,

‘Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.’

And he divided his living between them.

¹³Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had
and took his journey into a far country,

and there he squandered his property in loose living.

¹⁴And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country,
and he began to be in want.

¹⁵So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country,
who sent him into his fields to feed swine.

¹⁶And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate;
and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷But when he came to himself he said,

‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare,
but I perish here with hunger!

¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him,

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son;
treat me as one of your hired servants.”

²⁰And he arose and came to his father.

But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion,
and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

²¹And the son said to him,

‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²²But the father said to his servants,

‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him;

and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet;

²³and bring the fatted calf and kill it,

and let us eat and make merry;

²⁴for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’

And they began to make merry.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house,
he heard music and dancing.

²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant.

²⁷ And he said to him,
‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf,
because he has received him safe and sound.’

²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in.
His father came out and entreated him,

²⁹ but he answered his father,
‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command;
yet you never gave me a kid,
that I might make merry with my friends.

³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots,
you killed for him the fatted calf!’

³¹ And he said to him,
‘Son, you are always with me,
and all that is mine is yours.

³² It was fitting to make merry and be glad,
for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”