

4th SUNDAY IN LENT
March 31, 2019

Text: Luke 15:1-3 and 11b-32

Theme: Come to Life

There is an old saying that the shortest distance between two people is a good story. Jesus was a great teacher and healer and miracle worker but when he wanted people to think about their relationship with God (or when he wanted people to make peace with one another) he often made his point through stories. He told a story about a sower who went out to sow his seed to illustrate how important it was to be well-grounded in the Word of God. He told a story about a man who fell into the hands of robbers (who then beat him) in order to demonstrate what true compassion looks like especially when we are called to care for those outside of our comfort zone. Just last Sunday we heard the story of a man who had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and this week the story is about a man who had two sons.

Stories are how we get to know one another better. Last Saturday close to fifty people gathered at church for a *Meet and Greet Potluck Dinner*. We spent two hours engaged in the stories of others. I enjoy these dinners because I always leave knowing something new about someone that I never knew before. It is in the way we share where we were raised or how life has unfolded for us or which experiences have changed us that enable the listener to be fully engaged in the spirit of the story-teller. We understand them better and as the conversations deepen it can change the perception others have of us and we have of others.

Listening and telling our stories at that deeper level are two critical ingredients to what we call the ministry of reconciliation (a term used in our lesson from 2 Corinthians and is illustrated beautifully in the story of the *Prodigal Son*). In the ministry of reconciliation there is an initial breakdown in relationships (either with God or with each other) and it moves us to the work needed to resolve our differences. In this process towards healing it is necessary to have an honest exchange in order to get at the heart of what caused the break in the first place and then to move forward in faith.

In the lesson from 2 Corinthians we are told that we are to view others as Christ views us. In Christ the past will no longer define us and all things will become new. With the ministry of reconciliation defined for us in such a beautiful way we now apply it to the gospel lesson . . . a story about a man who had two sons.

We start with the younger son. How would he tell his story? He tells us that he is not connected with his family. He no longer wants to live with his father and brother but he wants to be out on his own. However, he is well aware that he does not have the financial means to break away. So in his strong desire to leave, he gathers up the courage to ask his father for his share of the inheritance that his father would later leave for him after his death. He understands that other people will find his actions disrespectful but he believes he has no other choice. It is either now or never.

Some of us may have heard this story before in our own families or among our friends! It is a story that hits so close to home that I offer a word of caution. This is not a story about whether or not we should give financial gifts when we find ourselves in a similar situation as that is a whole other struggle. This story is about relationships. Jesus told this story to help people understand how to make peace with one another.

So the son gets what he wants and does not look back. He settles down far from home and it seems that every decision he makes along the way only makes his life more miserable. Soon everything is gone. He works among the pigs. No one is willing to give him anything and then he hits rock bottom. He finally has to search his heart for a way to return to his father.

Jesus (in his wisdom) is not only talking about the broken relationships we have with other people but he is telling us that we can also break away from God, our Father.

Who has ever felt disconnected and distant from God?

How many times do we ignore God and go off and do our own thing?

When have we been disrespectful of God?

And once on our own, did things go as we had hoped?

At some point we (like the younger son) search for a way to return to God even though we are fully aware it is undeserved.

It is time to hear the story of the father. He is grieved, sad, and disappointed that his son does not feel connected to him and to the rest of the family. He does not demand that his son give up his plans. He gives him free will to do what he wants and then with a patience that defies human understanding he waits and prays for the day when his child will return. And when that day finally comes he does not care what it looks like to others. He runs and he puts his arms around his son and kisses him. He has his son draped in the finest of clothes and orders an amazing meal to assure his son that their relationship is intact.

O how we love that God, our Father, lavishes us with his love and mercy and grace even when we grieve and disappoint him. God does not stand in the way of our plans even if they are contrary to his will. God lets us go our own way and then waits and waits and waits for us and prays that we will repent and turn back home. And when that day comes, God runs towards us and embraces us and kisses us because God wants our relationship to be restored. God will wait for as long as it takes for us to come to our senses and return.

Finally we hear the story of the older son. To say he is not happy is an understatement. He comes home after working in the fields all day long when he hears music and he sees people dancing and then he sees his younger brother. How dare his brother walk around as if he did nothing wrong and how dare his father welcome his son back without thought of punishment. In anger he stays outside until his father approaches him. He challenges his father to explain the all the injustices he is witnessing. And in response he has to listen to his father tell him that this is not about him or their relationship. They are on solid ground. He has to listen to his father tell him to think about it from the perspective of his brother. Listen!

In this story there is no ending. God, the Father, is consistent in his behavior throughout the whole gospel lesson. But we have no idea how the older son responded to his father. More importantly we have no idea if the older son reconciled with his brother. We have no idea if he forgave his brother for the sake of the relationship.

The call to reconciliation and forgiveness is not a small matter or one that we can dismiss easily. Our future lies in being ambassadors of reconciliation. Each week we cannot confess love of God and love of neighbor and then remain divided or distant or discontent. What we learn in our story today is that we have God, our Father, ready to clear the way to resolve and restore our relationships. Amen