



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 4
Year C

A Ministry of Reconciliation

[RCL]: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

An image is formed by these lectionary passages, most especially by the epistle and the gospel story, of a God with open arms ready to receive us in a loving embrace. This image is constant and unchanging. Past and future don't exist in the eternal present of God's embrace: God is always waiting; God is always willing to take us in; God does not look back to our own miserable past, but God offers us the immediacy of love. Keep this image before your eyes.

“All this is from God,” St. Paul assures us, “who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” This act of reconciliation is rather difficult for us to understand since reconciliation implies that each side has been estranged before coming together—that, as we have drawn away from God, God has drawn away from us. Here is where language fails us, because, as both Jesus and Paul make it quite clear, it is we who have moved away, we who must return and be reconciled. God's arms remain open in order to embrace us when we return. These arms never push us away. Never.

In the familiar parable of what has come to be called The Prodigal Son, the father has never stopped loving the child who chose to go away, to live a dissolute life. Through one powerful sentence in the story—*But while he was still far off, his father saw him*—we too see the father constantly on the lookout for his lost son. And even though this formerly rich, well-nourished, and well-dressed young profligate is now filthy, skinny, and in rags, the father recognizes him from afar and runs to meet him with open arms.

The picture of the younger son who lives a life of sin and estrangement is nothing new. We recognize him all too well. He is the perfect image of selfishness—he takes what the father offers and goes away in order to waste it. We recognize human selfishness because it resides in all of us; we recognize the sin of saying “I am my own, I belong only to myself, I owe nothing to my Creator; I will do as I please.” All we have to do is glance at this new form of estrangement ironically called “social media.” The worship of Mammon and the fulfillment of all personal desires without regard to consequences are in front of our eyes daily in this age where nothing is private and nothing seems to be considered sacred. If we allow ourselves, we become witnesses to human lust, degradation, narcissism, greed, lies, and isolation pictured before us in films, computers, television, and media of all kinds. We see the condition of our own culture as we watch the

younger son in this parable lowering himself to the ultimate degradation for a Jew of his time; to live among pigs. In the eyes and ears of Jesus' Jewish listeners, nothing was dirtier than dealing with pigs.

If the story ended there, with expressions of "It served him right because he was an ungrateful son," the depression and desperation would be complete. But, thanks be to God, the story does not end there. The young man looks at his condition and is first aware of the terrible needs of his body, of hunger: "*Here I am living among pigs while even my father's servants have enough to eat.*" Of course, this is a selfish reaction, but we are tied to the needs of the physical self and it's an honest reaction. God gave us life and life must be preserved. But immediately, like the psalmist, the young sinner acknowledges his sin and does not conceal his guilt: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." This is the beginning of repentance, of turning around, of knowing that we don't belong to ourselves alone. Our separation, our sin, is first against heaven and then against those who have loved us. Acknowledging this state is the first step toward reconciliation.

The young son sets off to return to his father, confident that he will be received, because he knows his father's heart. And he is not wrong. The father is indeed keeping vigil, his arms open, his eyes searching the horizon to see the returning son, to recognize him as his own, no matter how disfigured he now is.

When the young man left his home years before, clutching his treasure, his thought was: *I can do what I want. I am my own.* Now he returns knowing that he belongs to his father, that he is not his own. And as he is received into the open arms of his loving father, he becomes the recipient of extreme generosity and largesse: excellent food, clean clothes, good footwear, and extravagant celebration—although he deserves none of it. It is enough that he has repented. He enters into the new creation made possible by reconciliation.

In St. Paul's understanding of the work of God through Christ, we can also understand the full meaning of this superb story. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" In the image Jesus paints of his Father, we begin to see this new creation. The father of the Prodigal Son does not ask, "*What have you done to bring yourself to this condition?*" He doesn't reprimand and say, "*I warned you that this would happen to you if you lived according to your desires.*" No, he asks nothing of the past because the "old has passed away." What comforting words these are. "The old has passed away."

Yet, reconciliation doesn't stop there. St. Paul makes it abundantly clear that now that God has taken us back into God's embrace, "reconciled us to himself through Christ," we receive a new gift: "the ministry of reconciliation." We cannot remain enclosed in this loving embrace without becoming "ambassadors for Christ."

There is so much misery in this world, so much living in both physical and spiritual hunger and in the degradation of all that is holy. The ministry of reconciliation, of spreading the good news of God's new creation in Christ, belongs to us. This may be daunting, even frightening, but it is there. We cannot escape

it. We must continue to remember that in this new creation, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” as St. Paul declares.

In a country that is bitterly divided, at a time when hatred seems to be winning over love and where hostility works against reconciliation, let us move as true ambassadors for Christ to spread the good news of God’s embrace for all of God’s creation and created beings. “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” St. Paul’s entreaty rings in our ears: “On behalf of Christ.” And the image of a loving father, of God’s arms ready to embrace each lost child, stays before our eyes as we proceed in this Lenten season toward resurrection.

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