



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 4 (C)
March 27, 2022

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

Joshua 5: 9-12

The people of God are catching their breath. They have crossed over another river... the Jordan. When this journey began, they crossed over the Red (Reed) Sea, fleeing their Egyptian oppressors. Now, with the wilderness in the rearview mirror, they make time for collecting their thoughts and re-orienting for lives focused on *establishing* versus lives focused on *flight and wandering*. They have just finished circumcision of all the male children born in the time in the wilderness. This is a reaffirmation of their covenant with God. For us, that would be like taking time to baptize all the babies and perhaps foreigners who had become part of the community during the flight/wandering time.

God *weighs in*. God reveals to Joshua a message to be communicated to the people: “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” The people, coming through a great ordeal of much suffering and loss, have received a blessing from God. The block of shame has been rolled away.

The people have acted. God has responded. Both sides of the promise are leaning toward one another. This is at the heart of what we do as people woven in a covenantal relationship with God. TURN. LEARN. PRAY. WORSHIP. Even in the absence of established buildings or a system of courts, the people’s faith gives them something to guide them, something to orient their actions. Truly, through all terrains, faith is a lifeline. And we Christians hearing this story hear a powerful echo. God, across all ages, has been rolling away that which would block new life.

- I wonder if you have ever had a wilderness experience that ended. How did you mark the arrival to a Promised Land? Did you have a need to renew your covenant with God?
- With the pandemic, it feels our whole world has been thrust into a wilderness experience. As we emerge from the pandemic, I wonder if our communities of faith might make a concerted effort to renew our Baptismal Covenants and lean into God.

Psalm 32

In the psalm, we hear a gentle reminder of what the relationship between Creator and creatures looks like at its best. Let’s just start with the fruit of this right relationship, shall we? The fruit of a right relationship is

gladness, joy, and rejoicing. Contrary to Prosperity Gospel tenets, it is not about financial prosperity. These are spiritual gifts!

These rewards are involuntary responses to a relationship that is functioning well. But for this to happen, each party in the relationship must have role clarity. The people's guilt has been removed because they are being honest with God. They are claiming their right size: small. They do not need to be bridled, because they are willingly submitting to God's gracious will. Not out of fear do they do this; when the humans have their right spiritual glasses on, they see truly that God is their refuge and safe hiding place – not their enemy!

They do not need to be afraid of *coming clean* with God. They need to be afraid of *not* coming clean with God. When I “hold my tongue” and hold back from coming clean to God, it is as though all living moisture in me evaporates. From a place of *appropriate smallness*, we can let God guide us. We let God be our eyes. God sees things we cannot. We can trust God. We are both the wicked and those who trust – depending on our choices from moment to moment. Having a healthy rule of life helps increase the amount of time spent connected in blessing with God. It helps us claim *true heart*.

- I wonder when you have felt spiritual moisture dried up from you. What was happening? What did you do to get re-connected to God?
- What might our faith communities do to encourage *sustaining rules of life* for the people of God?

2 Corinthians 5: 16

In this letter to the fledgling community of Christians living in Corinth, we are hearing more about this theme of *point of view*. For Paul, how we see things changes once we know about Jesus. Once baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we get new glasses. We must intentionally work to make sure we have these new lenses on as we approach our life. And things look different. We see a *new creation*. We see *new possibility*. We see *new connections*, where before we might have seen division and separation. And we see ourselves and our roles differently, too. We are now *reconcilers* on behalf of the one we follow. Jesus came to reconcile humans to God. As agents of Jesus, we work for him for *his mission*. We are not to be *counters* of sins, but counters of the inherent value of each and every human life.

- When was a time you struggled with your relationship with someone in your church community? Were you able to experience looking at the situation through Jesus' glasses?
- Do Jesus' lenses always mean being agreeable? When was a time you saw through Jesus' glasses that you needed to advocate with a difficult boundary?
- When we think about systemic racism in this country, what might our efforts look like if we are wearing Jesus' glasses?

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

I love the context of this Parable of the Prodigal Son. Hungry, hurting seekers are drawing close to Jesus for more of his *Bread of Life* words. And the religious elites are standing by and grumbling. They are irritated that Jesus hangs out with, and even more intimately, *shares a meal* with people who sin. This little,

teeny, tiny, context that precedes the parable is a powerful cautionary tale to all of us who work in the church. Powerholding is for God. *Our* work is stewarding and distributing God’s power—especially distributing power to those who have the least. Empowerment of others. Empowerment of the least among us in terms of status. Servant, foot-washing leadership. Jesus hangs out with *people who sin and are hungry for guidance*. What was the difference between the tax collectors and the religious elite? The tax collectors were sinners and were hungry for guidance. The religious, grumbling elite, were just sinners.

Jesus will tell a tale of extravagant love, acceptance, and welcome for those who know they have strayed and who Turn, Learn, and Pray. The one who leaves the story empty-hearted: The one who feels there is nothing for them to learn, the one who feels like he already has it all figured out, the “older sibling” who has been at this game longer but is no longer seeking revelation.

- I wonder if you have ever experienced a time in the church where you came close to the Bread of Life. What was happening in your own life? What did it feel like?
- I wonder if you have ever experienced exclusivity in the church. What was happening? What did it feel like?
- I wonder who in your world today might need an invitation to come close to Jesus, the Bread of Life. How might you invite them in?
- I wonder if there might be *openings of invitation* implicit in each of the seven aspects of the Way of Love: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest.

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