

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Lent IV

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Two brothers who could both lay claim to an inheritance, but only one made a demand for his. Two brothers with different personalities; the profligate and the dutiful. A father who is prodigious enough to welcome the profligate son back home. Don't we all have people with similar tendencies in our families? Yes, we do. And don't we all experience within ourselves the constant battle between the desire to be measured and the desire to be reckless? Oh yes, we do.

Within the context of these personal battles, we come to realize our often lack of control over our own selves and some of the decisions we make. There are times when we win some of these battles, not because we are created other than who we are, or we are a little special, but because we recognize deep within ourselves the ultimate value of being reconciled with God through Christ. And for the sake of being made new creatures through Christ, we are inclined to look more to the healing grace of God as being sufficient enough to embrace us than our own claim of being self-sufficient. There are also times when we falter, when we go off the rails, when pride takes hold of us, maximizing our illusion of total self-reliance and minimizing the value of others in our lives. But this also is not because we are created other than who we are, or there is some deficiency with us. No, there is no deficiency in our nature. Rather, we falter because look only to ourselves for answers to our questions and consider others as means to the end we seek.

God did not create us as robots, for if that were the case, the world would have been a much different place. There is nothing wrong with you or me or how we were created. The psalmist reiterates this idea when he reminds us, that we were created and knit together by God, and for that we praise God because we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Because God created us, God has a hold on us, we cannot hide from Him, nor can we escape from His presence. Even at our lowest point, when all things material point to the fact that we are self-sufficient, God is still present with us, guiding our steps to trust in His reconciling love through Christ, and to avail ourselves to it. For Jesus then, all the son had to do was to avail himself to that which was already available to him.

That is the sense of realization that came upon the son who took his inheritance and went abroad thinking that the inheritance by itself will guarantee him the self-sufficiency that he craved. And although the father could have refused his request, he did not do that, but gave him what was his due. It is always tempting to perceive God as a controlling freak who desires to dictate how we use what He Himself has given us. One of the inheritances that we have received is the gift of freedom. God doesn't control how we use our freedom; either for good or for bad, for we are to use it the best way we see fit. Some find this latitude a little too much because they would prefer that God both give the inheritance and control the usage thereof. But the question is, why would God give us an inheritance and also control the manner in which we use the gift? How then can we be accountable if we have no control over our inheritance?

The Pharisees and the Scribes who complained about Jesus welcoming sinners understood what it meant to be accountable; they were righteous but others were not.

They assumed that because they followed law as a duty, they themselves weren't sinners and so Jesus would be justified in welcoming and associating with them. And because of their misunderstanding of the ministry of Jesus, they also wondered why he would welcome and associate with people who were out of bounds of God's mercy.

In telling the gospel story, Jesus not only draws a distinction between those who think duty-and in this case, following the law was the only means to God, and that the duty was sufficient in itself, and those who believe in the boundless mercies of God. In his reply to the Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus sought to undermine the false sense that underlies the human drive to self-sufficiency, and opens the window to a new understanding of God that the Pharisees and the Scribes may not have been previously aware of. Jesus casts God in the image of a father who welcomes his reckless son, not because the father doesn't care about the recklessness of the son, but that his recklessness was not enough to substitute his love for him. More importantly, what mattered was the courage of the son to come back home. God's boundless mercy makes it possible for God to welcome those who out of the depth of their sins reach out to be reconciled with Him.

Jesus doesn't paint God as heartless, but he paints God as one who values the return of one sinner than a hundred righteous. Just as much as the father honors the freedom of those who go wayward, so does he honor the freedom of those who out of courage find their way back to Him. God, as presented by Jesus, always has His hands open, wide open enough and stands ready to welcome the sinner. All it takes is the courage for the son-for you and me to realize that in our father's house are many rooms, and there is always one more room for one more repentant sinner.

Having spent all his inheritance, and left with nothing, he realized the illusion of self-sufficiency, and so offered himself up for work feeding pigs, just so he could earn himself enough to live on.

But as he fed pigs, he, according to the gospel, “came to himself”, in other words, he had an epiphany, a self-awareness within which he realized his sense of worth, not as one who is self-sufficient but as one who could rely on the generosity of his father. As a son, he was worth more than his present status; he was worth more than feeding pigs or eating their food. If he thought his offense was more than he or his father could handle, he thought to himself, I am worth more than this!! It was this kind of self-affirmation, this sense of self-worth that generated the needed courage to go back home to his father, and be reconciled with him. For me, that is the climax of the story; where although all material evidence pointed to this man being at the lowest ebb, that to me is also the moment where he was at the highest point. That to me is the place where a new sense of courage and awareness leads us to.

See, it is not for lack of awareness that we don't reach out to be reconciled with God, it is for lack of courage-the strength of mind which is able to overcome anything that threatens the attainment of the highest good. Paul Tillich argues that “Courage is self-affirmation “in-spite-of,” that is in spite of that which tends to prevent the self from affirming itself.” And to me, the self can only affirm itself when it is in union with God or reaches out to be in union with God.

Like the father, God always has his hands open, seeking to be reconciled with us. As heavy as our sins may be, as burdensome as our load maybe, as weary as we may be from running away, be assured that God is where we yearn to hide. And so if we want to run, I'd

suggest that we run towards Him instead, and let Him welcome us, put a new robe on us and celebrate with us because we had the courage to find our way back home. If He thought we were lost, we have been found because we found our way back home. Amen