

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Year C

RCL



2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Psalm 32

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The Collect

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Psalm 32 Page 624, BCP

Beati quorum

- 1 Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!
- 2 Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile!
- 3 While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long.
- 4 For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.
- 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt.
- 6 I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.
- 7 Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble; when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.
- 8 You are my hiding-place; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.
- 9 "I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; I will guide you with my eye.
- 10 Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you."
- 11 Great are the tribulations of the wicked; but mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD.
- 12 Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the LORD; shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might

become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So Jesus told them this parable:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed

the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it,

and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the fa-

ther said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

SERMON

President Coolidge came back from church and was asked by an aide what the preacher had preached on.

“Sin”, said Silent Cal.

“Well, Mr. President, what did he say about it?” asked the aide.

“He’s agin it”, replied the President.

That’s an important joke because it shows us something of the way we approach the nasty little words “sin” and “evil”. We’re clearly “agin” them, but do we do we take them seriously, as real things? Don’t we see “sin” as just the bad things people do and “evil” as some floppy, ill-defined notion of what the bad guys are in favor of? Lent is the season when we examine our relationship with God. I’d like to suggest that as postmodern people living in a postmodern world, we don’t engage either term either seriously or maturely. Being

“agin” some abstraction of sin is meaningless.

The first way we deal ineffectively with the question of sin is to tirelessly involve ourselves with the mote in our brother’s eye while ignoring the log in our own.

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

We push sin into somebody else’s lap like a bowl of over-cooked Brussels Sprouts. Sin is something other people do. We make mistakes out of the best of motives. Other people do evil things for evil reasons in the furtherance of evil, for evil’s sake. To imagine that our calling is to be judge over other people’s actions is to set up our own conscience as the final arbiter of good and evil. Once we do that, we’ve REALLY gotten ourselves curled up into a comfortable place where we can

do no wrong.

That just can't be right. Do we really believe that we can do no wrong? This is a cultured, educated country, so we naturally identify ourselves with the opposite of evil, yet we dropped napalm on a nine-year old girl and massacred a village at My Lai. We have lost 4,409 American service men and women in Iraq but there have been 110,000 violent deaths in Iraq since April, 2009. As a result of our mistakes, from the best of motives, about five percent of Iraqi children have lost one or both of their parents, and there are now nearly a million orphans in Iraq¹. We characterize attacks upon us as intentional evil done to us out of bad motives. We characterize the orphans we have left behind as collateral damage. We have laid our own hand upon our own heads and blessed ourselves. How did this happen in a

¹ "Iraq Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Final Report, 2011" September 2012

cultured and educated country? How did we come to believe we can do no wrong?

I'd argue that it happened to us because we refuse to take the existence of evil in our world seriously. Evil runs like a streak of gristle through the world, and through us, but it is so uncomfortable to admit that we are part of the problem, and so pleasing and flattering to imagine that we are just innocent victims of other people's sin that we have taken the easy way out and labeled speculation about evil and sin to be old-fashioned and unproductive, at least as applied to us. Comments about other people's sins are still just fine. Sin is what other people do.

Take the current political fight over marriage equality — same sex marriage. What easier thing to condemn, if you are heterosexual, than same sex marriage? Overall, I can feel pretty good about myself if I just de-

fine sin as a same sex marriage because there's one sin I am not guilty of. Engaging evil by pushing it into someone else's lap is not engaging evil at all. It is an attempt to gain the high moral ground from which we can condemn others. The first way we refuse to engage the existence of evil in our world is by pushing it off on someone else and claiming the high moral ground, which properly belongs to God, for ourselves.

Ironically, the next way we refuse to engage evil in our world and ourselves is to frankly deny that it exists. The world is basically a good place that just needs a little judicious tweaking which is well within our abilities. We explain evil away by assuming that we can cure it as if it were a disease. When we go on about such and such a thing being unacceptable now that we live in the twenty-first century what we're really saying is that left to its own devices the march of civilization will

progress in such a way as to ultimately remove evil from our midst. We just need to be better educated and more technologically adept. Evil is like small pox, very deadly but subject to eradication with enough education and technology. One bright day there will be no Aurora Colorado shooter for we will have diagnosed the organic brain dysfunction which lead him to open fire on a theater and successfully treated it before he acts.

We hold to this view that we can save ourselves from sin by our own efforts despite the lessons of history. Germany in the 1930's was a cultured, educated country, too, yet it gave birth to the unspeakable horror we call the Holocaust. The lessons of history and the teaching of the Gospel tells us that evil runs like a streak of gristle through the world, and through each human heart as well. It is a real, structural part of the world and of ourselves. History teaches us that in

10,000 years of trying we have yet to devise a community where peace reigns. Those who convince themselves that they need no God because evil is susceptible to human efforts also put themselves at odds with the entirety of human history.

It is dreadfully hard for us to confess that we are powerless to deal with evil by our own efforts, but history teaches this with sufficient certainty as to make it perverse to reject it. Americans, particularly, eagerly embrace the idea that if we all work hard, we can make an Eden of the earth. It makes us feel good to urge people to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps — until you try it yourself. Go ahead — grab onto your bootstraps and yank up as hard as you can. Now, let the bruise on your bottom remind you to stop telling people to do that. It's impossible.

The reality of sin in personal and common life

which we confess each Sunday is the streak of gristle that goes through our world, and you are not able to deal with it because you are part of the problem. To make any progress at all you must first admit that you are not the savior of the world then trust the real savior of the world to address it because only God can deal with it.

That sounds pretty properly churchy, but the truth is, we don't believe that. We point to our great accomplishments as proof of our limitless promise and power and it is true that the American economy is the wonder of the world. Yet, ABC News this week reported that American corporations are sitting on one trillion dollars, while unemployment remains high. One million seconds is about 11 days. One trillion seconds is about 32,000 years. How is it that corporations are doing well and twelve million individual Americans are not? Is it

not because corporations have become so adept at making money without hiring people? That might be great for the economic indicators we hear of on the nightly news, but what of the cost to those who can't find work? Is this not actually an evil thing? Are we engaging the harm we are doing, or are we denying that it exists? Worse yet, are we actually blaming those who cannot find work in an economy which no longer has any need for them? It's a gloomy picture. You are powerless to address the systemic issues that are bringing about this disparity in opportunity. You can't cure it, like a head cold, because you are part of the problem. The streak of gristle runs through you as well.

It's not all bad news. The good news starts here. Even though the problem of evil in our world and in ourselves is beyond our power to address, it is not beyond God's power to address. God is working through

the redemption of our world every moment. It begins when God welcomes us back from the wasteland and famine where we had been wandering into the family again. When God does deal with it, and welcomes us back into his love, we call that redemption. Refusing to embrace God's power of redemption for all the world is the final way we fail to deal maturely with evil.

At the conclusion of the young man's travails in our parable for today, he admits his mistake. To our surprise, his father says that he won't let the streak of gristle, the stain of sin, which caused his son to do evil to define his son. There is redemption after all. Unfortunately, the older son wants to negate the possibility of redemption.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your

brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in.

There is perhaps no greater challenge to our calling to be Christ’s ambassadors in the world than our resistance to the idea of redemption for others. It was certainly a stumbling block for the older brother, and it was a stumbling block for the Pharisees and the scribes who were grumbling about Jesus’ choice of companions. However often Jesus spoke of his mission of redemption or acted it out in healings, our streak of gristle holds on to the idea that once you have offended, that’s it for you. We don’t want to be around you because it might rub off on us. You’re known by the company you keep, we remind ourselves. Jesus kept terrible company but he took the view that by keeping company with broken people, He might rub off on them, and so He did.

He rubbed off on anyone who came in contact with Him. Some were terribly offended.

Lent is the season when we examine our relationship with God. Lent is the season in which we remind ourselves that we need God, that God is not an option we have chosen but a necessity for life. If we truly believe that Christ's coming was to defeat evil, then we have to admit the existence of evil, and both our inability to defeat it and our complicity in it. Just as in any twelve-step program, the first step is to admit that the problem exists and that we are unable, alone, to conquer it. This will lose a lot of seekers to the church who want to cling to their flattering notions of their own abilities, but it is inescapable.

We, the church, are called to join Christ in his reconciliation of the world to God, gristle and all. To do so, we must become intentional Christians by dedicating

ourselves to three things: to meditative prayer, to holiness and to a commitment to justice. Here is how:

For those who wish it, call me at the church and we will arrange a time, one-on-one, during which I will teach you the practice of meditative prayer. I don't want to do this as part of a class. A class is too distracting. The prayer I will teach you in about half an hour is very, very old and very, very powerful. It is not possible to commit yourself to the path Jesus showed without centering on Him. That is the purpose of a centering prayer. The centering prayer which I will teach you will not remove the gristle in the world or the gristle in your heart. What it will do is to draw you back to Jesus as you stray. If you are called to this prayer, let me know.

For those who wish it, the prayer I will teach will lead you to a commitment to separateness from the world. This separateness is what we mean by holiness.

We will speak more of this.

For those who wish it, a commitment to justice is a learned outcome of the first two. By connecting with the source of power through prayer, by separating yourself from the gristle of the world, one becomes able to live out God's restorative justice.

It is meaningless to be "agin" an abstraction of evil. Holiness begins with an acknowledgement of the reality of sin in personal and common life and leads to a commitment to walk the path Jesus taught.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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