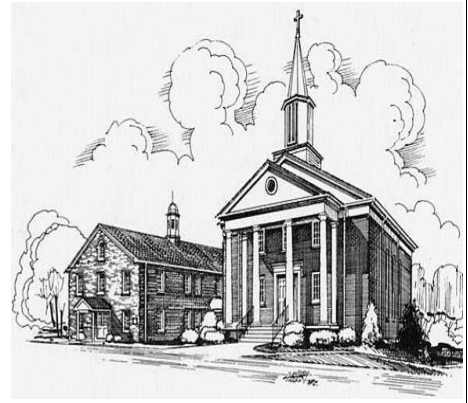


The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Year C
RCL



Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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.

INTRODUCTION OF THE COLLAGE

John 19:1-7 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they slapped him in the face. Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, “Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him.” When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!” But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.” The Jewish leaders

insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

Psalm 32

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

I wonder if you ever thought about how important villains are to our sense of well-being. We really NEED our villains because they provide us such flattering comparisons. We can call this the ethic of “comparative virtue”. Comparative virtue teaches that people are either saints or sinners and that the saints are saints only to the extent that they are so by comparison with the sinners. Last week, I quoted something said on Facebook:

Too often we settle for being less cruel, less hypocritical, less evil than the other guy and then call it righteousness. ¹

The problem for those who are comfortable with the ethic of comparative virtue, of course, is the church, because:

The church cannot settle for the lesser of evils; the church cannot settle for anything

¹ James Scott Storie, Lead Pastor at First Christian Church Of Florence Alabama

less than the gospel.²

Comparative virtue nevertheless holds within itself an important truth – that within each saint lies the soul of a sinner, and within each sinner, the hope of a saint. We can build on this.

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.”

The scribes the Pharisees were comfortable dividing the world into saints and sinners without reflecting on the connection between these two groups. The irony of this understanding becomes plain when one takes a minute to notice which division of humanity is listening to Jesus and which is judging Him and finding Him wanting. There must be an award for being “more righteous than Jesus”. That’s quite an accomplishment!

² Ibid.

Jesus is reaching out to those in his society who were willing to admit that they were in need of spiritual food, and he was roundly criticized by those who had hidden their own sins from themselves – those who measured their righteousness upon a scale that was of no interest to Jesus. Here was a real teaching opportunity because Jesus was going to show them that restoration is possible – sinners can become saints. They were going to hate the lesson, but that is always the way with difficult lessons. The scene was set for an important parable. As I read the text, Jesus' parable brought to my mind a very old memory that surprisingly resurfaced this week.

Twenty years ago, a man came home and retired to his bed in rural Boyd County. Five young men secretly followed him home. When I say “young” I mean just that. Sam, the one I want to tell you about, was only 17.

Their plan was to rob him.

Now, I know that when you were seventeen, you never, ever did anything which on closer reflection might have been characterized as “idiotic”. I’d like to tell you that I never did, either, but that would be a lie. If you’re seventeen, you have very little experience with the actual world. Really, most of what you would call “your experience” actually came from movies and TV. Grownups can remind themselves that the things we see on TV are made up. It's not easy, but grownups can manage it. It is much more difficult if you are seventeen and have no real experience with the world with which to measure your actions other than what you have seen on TV.

Suppose you were writing a crime drama. In your drama, the plot turns on the robbery of a man in his own house. How would that play out on TV? I’d suggest that

the most common plot device would be to have your confederates enter the house undetected, hit the homeowner on the head with something and “knock him out”, then rob the place and make your escape before the homeowner regained consciousness. Later, the homeowner would struggle to his feet, his hand on his head, and call the police but by then, of course, you’d have made your getaway.

How many times have you watched that happen, on TV? Did you ever question whether that whole “knock him out” thing is medically accurate? It is not, but of course these young people didn’t know that. They'd seen it in countless TV shows and movies. They thought that was the way things worked. In fact, they assured the police that when they left, “he was snoring”, which they took to mean he was fine. What they believed to be snoring was, actually, his death rattle. They

had beaten him to death.

The teaching of our tribal elders, our contemporary scribes and Pharisees, would be that these young people must be cast out beyond the pale, expelled for life from the world shared by the decent folk of our time, and so it was done. I convicted them, and they received long sentences. Justice was done, the tribal elders were pleased, and the door slammed shut on these young men.

Except, of course, that it didn't. People sent off to prison don't evaporate in a puff of smoke. They live, still. Sam lived in prison, and turned himself toward doing something positive with the time, earning an associate's degree and numerous certificates. Eventually, he served his time and was released. Now nearly 40 years old, he enrolled in a local college. Things did not go smoothly. Someone brought to light that he had not

checked a box on his application indicating that he had a criminal record and for that reason a complaint was brought with the disciplinary committee to expel him.

Here, at last, we find the flaw in the argument of the scribes and the Pharisees – there is no room in their understanding for restoration. Once a villain, always a villain. Jesus had the better teaching – life is a journey filled with slips and missteps but restoration is always possible and we, as God’s children, are invited to join in the Father’s celebration when restoration occurs.

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.

Of course, if we want to be honest, we experience the greatest difficulties in joining any kind of restora-

tion party. We don't entirely embrace the idea of restoration because we really need our villains! They provide such flattering contrasts! We don't like the idea of one of them being restored!

“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.

Both restoration and forgiveness close the door on the past and open a door to a future imbued with hope. Refusing to recognize restoration or to forgive is to wall yourself off in a dead past.

Paul wrote to his church in Corinth:

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.

Celebrate the possibility of restoration in all of us!

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation and everything old has passed away.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

I met Sam for the first time in twenty years this week. It was a remarkable meeting! He had served out his sentence and was released two years ago. Despite his degrees and certificates earned during his incarceration, he has not found permanent work. The occasion of our meeting was because of the college's effort to expel him. His adviser asked me to write a letter in his favor, which I did, and the college relented. Apparently, kicking people when they're down is frowned on in the halls of academia. I'm glad for that, for I would not wish to live in a world in which there could be no restoration.

May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the Lord lift his countenance upon you, and be gracious unto you.

May the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and

give you peace.

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

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