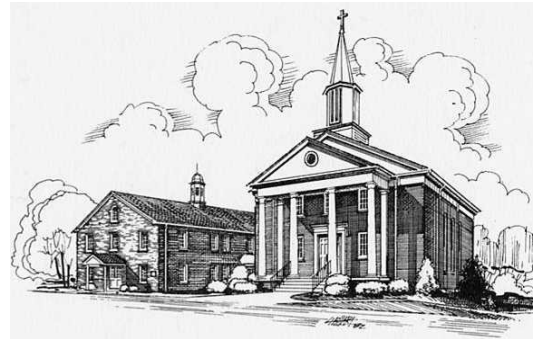


**The Lessons Appointed for
Use on the
Fourth Sunday in Lent**



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

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 un-
derstanding; *
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

What goes through your mind when you read one of the parables told by Jesus? Do you mentally put it into King James English and discount it because it was so long ago? Do you ever think of the outrageous things Jesus is teaching, and the cost of obeying that teaching? The Revised Common Lectionary offers us the parable of the Prodigal Son every three years. I look forward to it because it parallels my life experience so well. I spent more than 25 years in the punishment business and I've now spent more than 12 years in the redemption business. I want to use that experience to study this parable by having you sit with me at a sentencing.

In the parable, a father has two sons. One day, the younger son announces he's not interested in working the family farm (or working at all come to that) and so demands his inheritance. Surprisingly, Dad divides his

property and gives the boy his inheritance. The boy then runs off to a distant land where he lives it up big time with the expected result – he goes broke. Worse than that, there’s a famine and he has to go to work after all feeding pigs of all things.

Well, so far we’ve got a pretty judgmental and unsurprising parable. You reap what you sow. He’s got no one to blame but himself. If he had done the right thing, and stayed with his father working the family farm, this wouldn’t have happened to him, so it’s all his fault. That’s a story we’re familiar with, one we apply down to today. Of course, we’ve only read the first half of the parable. Jesus isn’t finished.

The boy comes to his senses and goes to his father to repent.

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.

Our judgmental parable has taken a distinctly churchy turn. The boy has confessed, taken responsibility for his sins, and repented. The churchy part of the parable is all good news. Forgiveness is readily available.

Of course, that’s not all there is to this tale. There’s still the older son, the one who’s been working his butt off all the while.

“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!'

Let's take our place at the prosecution table and see if we might gain some insight into what Jesus is telling us. At defense table is a young man and a young woman, together with their counsel. They have previously entered pleas of guilty to four counts of possession of controlled substances with intent to distribute. You also know that they have two pre-school age children. The range of punishment for each count is five to ten years. Given the number of counts, should the sentences run consecutively, they would be looking at 40 years.

In the gallery, we have two distinct groups of people.

One group is made up of those who, like the younger son in the parable, have taken a wrong turn and have come to see their folly.

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.

The other group, made up of the professional religious, have come to stand judgment.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

They live in a simple world. There are good guys, who do the right thing, and bad guys who don't and never the twain shall meet. You are known by the company you keep. If you hang out with the bad guys, you're going to be identified with the bad guys, so we are supposed to shun the bad guys, but Jesus is welcoming them. Here is the first cost of his parable. To follow His teachings, you're going to have to associate with

those rejected by most people.

These two groups are going to have very different views of how the sentencing should come out. There's an old joke in the legal community about a fellow who was sentenced to 110 years. He replied to the judge, "Judge? I don't think I can do that much time."

The judge answered, "Well, son, then you must do the best you can." That, I think, would be the position of the Pharisees and scribes. In their world view, it is of first importance that those who break the law be held accountable. That's the whole point of the exercise.

There's another view of accountability, though, one to which the sinners and tax collectors might be sympathetic. The lives of the accused are already rendered valueless. Their pleas of guilty have branded them with the identity of convicted felon. If we're known by the company we keep, who is going to willingly associate

with them, even if they get no jail time? Who is going to hire them? They are already suffering.

I know what the people who elected me twice would counsel me about sentencing. “Lock them up and throw away the key! That’s the only thing drug dealers understand.” If we asked the “sinners and tax collectors” the same question, though, I suspect we would get a much different answer. Jesus was offering a message of redemption and those who have faced their mistakes understand the value of redemption. What would be their counsel to us at the prosecution table? Might they not be less interested in making an example of the accused and more interested in finding a way to a redeemed life for them? What would the scribes and the Pharisees think of such a suggestion? Come to that, what do you and I at the prosecution table think of it?

Just as the sentencing is to begin, there’s a noise in

the gallery, it begins as a soft wail, then builds to a loud, “Mommy!” It is the older of their two young children, her arms out toward her mother. Her cry is immediately echoed by an inarticulate wail from her mother. “I’m a terrible person”, she sobs. “I need help! I just want to be with my babies! Help me, judge! Help me!”

Those of us at the prosecution table know what the law says, and we know what the people who elected us expect from us, but we also see the two children and we hear the anguish and repentance in the mother’s tears that those who read of this sentencing in the newspaper will never see or hear. These two have brought suffering on our community and upon themselves. Repentance or no, what should be done with them?

I’m trying to picture for you just what a radical teaching Jesus is presenting. This is no scholarly exercise. This is no feel-good sermon celebrating the righteous-

ness of the good guys. This is infuriating. This is an affront to the older son who has done the right thing, who stayed with his father and worked.

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!'

What an achingly human response! From his perspective, father is just rewarding bad conduct and devaluing his hard and faithful work. Our sympathies are with him. He's got a right, we feel, to be mad. That's the human way. Jesus brings a different message – that the goal is to redeem sinners and return them to the home of the Father rather than to destroy them as an example

to others.

So, what are we to do with the two at the next table? The people who elected us are going to be watching. Sentencing these two to anything less than substantial jail time will be seen by those who read of it in the newspaper as weakness by the prosecution, but they haven't heard the child's wail nor the mother's response. You sat beside me and heard it. What is your counsel to me about sentencing? What values drive your decision?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

We've had a good example this week of the importance of taking responsibility for our sins. Jussie Smollett seems to have orchestrated a fake hate crime against himself. That's a horrible thing to do, yet all charges have now been dismissed. I want to believe he has repented. I do not believe that. He is now claiming his innocence, painting himself as the victim. He has not taken responsibility for his actions as did the younger boy in Jesus' parable. Redemption is the fruit of repentance. As I've said many times before, our time of confession is when we take ownership of our sins. If you're just reciting the words of the Pater Noster on autopilot I'd prefer that you read a magazine instead.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you

peace.

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

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