

4th Sunday in Lent

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

Joshua 5:9-12 deals with the end of one of the most important eras of Israelite history and the inauguration of a second era. It is the end of the old and the beginning of the new.

The era that has come to its conclusion in this passage is Israel's release from Egyptian bondage and their being honed into a people in the wilderness. God had promised Moses at the burning bush on Mount Sinai, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites" (Exod. 3:7-8).

God had indeed delivered Israel from the Egyptians "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm". But because of their own fear of intimidation and their refusal to trust God with assured victory, Israel had wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Now, with the death of the generation of intimidated former slaves and the emergence of a generation hardened in the desert, Israel was prepared to possess that "land flowing with milk and honey" promised to them by God. It is this event of transition with which the Old Testament scripture for the 4th Sunday in Lent deals.

The people camped at Gilgal, immediately west of the Jordan River that they had just crossed and which had provided them entrance into the Promised Land. Here, for the first time in the land that God has given to them, the Israelites celebrate the Passover – the event that reminds them of how God delivered them both from certain death and from Egyptian slavery back in the land of their exploitation. With that celebration, "the manna ceased on that day, and the Israelites ate the crops of the land of Canaan" (v. 12). God had taken them off their desert rations, and they now began to eat the fruit of the land in which they would now make their home as a nation.

With the ceasing of the flow of manna and the Israelites beginning to live off the land, the old era of liberation and wilderness discipline had come to an end, and a new era begun – an era of self-sustenance and even abundance upon their own land given them by God. Thus the Lord declared to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt" (5:9). The redemption of Israel had been completed, for God had promised them not only to release them from their Egyptian taskmasters, but also to "bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites" (Exod. 3:8). Now, God had kept God's word, the goal had been reached, and Israel was now the occupants of a new land!

If this had not happened, if Israel would have been freed from Egyptian tyranny but never occupied a new land, God's liberation of them would have been incomplete. If that goal had not been reached, then the disgrace of being slaves and the scorn of Egypt's taskmasters would have remained (Deut. 9:28). But now the goal had been reached, and God had completed God's work of redemption and liberation of the Israelites.

To commemorate this momentous transition in the life of this newly birthed nation, the Israelites named the place “Gilgal”. Gilgal is an adaptation of the Hebrew word, *galal*, which means “to roll” or “to roll away”. Israel’s reproach had been “rolled away”, God had been true to God’s word, and they had been both delivered and given an investment of land by God. And now they were ready to begin the task of building a nation under God, a nation of shalom, faithful to God’s call to them to “love justice, bve mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Israel’s liberation from Egypt and from the wilderness was now complete! Now before them lay the task of building a nation that was a reflection of God’s intentions for human society.

Psalm 32 is about the joy of forgiveness when one honestly confesses his sin to God. It can be divided in two ways. One way is to see it as a two-way conversation – the penitent’s confession of sin and sense of forgiveness (vss. 1-7 and the concluding statement in vss. 10-11) and God’s response to the penitent (vss. 8-9). A second way to divide the psalm is to perceive its first part as vss. 1-5 which concentrates on the joy of thanksgiving in the light of confession and forgiveness of sin, and the second part as vss. 6-11 as a witness to God’s redemptive work within us. In this division of the psalm, verses 8-9 is not a statement by God but rather the Psalmist’s witness to God’s grace. I personally prefer the first way of interpreting the psalm, seeing it as a two-way conversation between the penitent and God.

The psalm begins with a declaration of grace. “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit” (vss. 1-2).

The psalmist then continues that as long as he kept his sin to himself and didn’t confess it or deal with it, “my body wasted away through my groaning all day long” (vs. 3). He could try to cover up his sin, but he knew that he had done wrong and that knowledge weighed heavily upon him. But “then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity” (vs. 5). When the psalmist became honest with himself and both admitted his sin to himself and to God, then – and only then – did he begin to become free enough to deal with that sin. Unacknowledged sin would only work its damage within him. Redemption began by being honest enough to admit it to himself as well as to God.

Once he acknowledged his sin, confessed it and knew that God had forgiven him, then a miracle occurred within him. “You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance” (vs. 7).

Now that the psalmist has become free of his sin because he has confessed it, become penitent and received the forgiveness of God, he can get on with the rest of his life. God now speaks, instructing the psalmist on the next steps he needs to take if he is to move toward wholeness. “I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you” (vss. 8-9). Confessed and forgiven sin becomes the seedbed for one’s own spiritual maturation. So faith does not consist only of confession of sin and accepting of forgiveness. That is only the beginning. One must also desire to grow in his knowledge and commitment to nurturing one’s relationship with God. And when one does that,

then God can begin to work within one, curb that which has formerly defeated him, and open him to a new way of life in relationship with God and his companions on the way.

Thus, the Psalm concludes “Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart” (vss. 10-11).

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 begins, “Now 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” (15:1-3). And the parable he then tells his listeners is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (vs. 11b-32).

This opening is very important to our understanding of Jesus’ most famous parable.

Jesus actually tells three parables in succession. The first is the parable of the Lost Sheep (15:4-7). The second is the parable of the Lost Coin (vss. 8-10). But the most important of the parables is the third – the Parable of the Prodigal Son (vss. 11-32).

The parable divides into two parts. The first part (15:11-24) deals with the prodigal son himself. The second part (11:25-32) deals with the response of his elder brother. The parable cannot be truly understood unless one examines both parts thoroughly, and doesn’t yield to the temptation to concentrate only upon the prodigal brother.

A younger son asks for his inheritance before the death of his father (a highly inappropriate request in Jewish society). His father, who would have every right to deny him his request, instead gives the inheritance to his younger son. The son leaves home with his considerable wealth and squanders that wealth in dissolute living. Reduced to feeding pigs (the worst employment that any Israelite could seek), he is so hungry that he fights with the pigs over their slop. Recognizing his plight, he decides to return to his father, beg his forgiveness and – because he has already forfeited his place in the family by demanding and receiving his birthright – ask his father to employ him as a servant. What humiliation for this young man! But he is desperate. So he sets forth to implement his plan.

But Jesus tells us, “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” (vs. 20). The best translation of the Greek would not suggest a casual or a happenstance “seeing” of the son. Rather, it was as if the father was fixed to the gate, spending day and night there, searching the horizon for his son while hoping against hope that he would return. And suddenly, he does!

Before the young man can complete his carefully rehearsed speech, the father overwhelms him. He is embraced and silenced by his father, who with the greatest joy welcomes home his errant son and declares a celebration be held for him! “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (vs. 24a)! So the entire household begins to celebrate!

What a description of grace! It is one of the finest descriptions that appear in scripture. God (who in this parable is the father) loves and accepts us when there is absolutely nothing to love. There is nothing acceptable about us – when all of our actions, attitudes and words have worked against any such acceptance. In fact, we’ve been offensive and alienating to God, but God goes on loving and accepting us, although God may not approve of our actions. This is the grounds upon which the shalom community – the kingdom of God – is to be built!

But the grace of God does us no good unless we receive it. That love and grace was always there for that son. But he was not open to it – in fact, he was earlier resistant to it and rejecting of his father. He was completely caught up in his own agenda and thoroughly selfish, so he was closed to the grace offered to him.

But then the text tells us, “he came to himself”! Life tumbled in sufficiently for the younger son to face his mistake and to return to his father. So, we discover the grace of God for our own lives when we are brought “to ourselves”, face our own contingencies, sin and weaknesses, and turn to God. And there God is, waiting by the garden gate, searching the horizon to catch the first glimpse of our return. So God even stills our confession, receives it and wraps arms of love around us. “For this son or daughter of mine was dead and is alive again; lost and is found!”

The second part of the Parable of the Prodigal Son picks up the common theme of all three of these parables – rejoicing over those who respond to God’s grace (vss. 25-32). In this portion of the parable, the obedient elder son is returning from the fields where he has labored all day, and as he approaches the house, he can hear the festival going on inside it. Asking a servant what is going on, he learns of his brother’s return and his father’s response. He is both angry and hurt, and refuses to enter the house and join the party.

The father must come out to the elder son and ask him to join them. Instead of following his father’s request, all of the elder son’s resentment at having been the “good boy” bursts forth. “Listen”, he says to his father, “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 comes back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him” (vss. 29-30)!

The father’s response to his hurt and offended son is all grace – both to this son and to the prodigal. He replies, “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” (vss. 31-32).

Jesus never finishes the story. We don’t know how it ends. Instead, he stops the story at this point. And the reason why is that the story doesn’t need to end, because we don’t need to know the response of the elder brother. The point is already made by Jesus. No matter whom we are, whether a prodigal or a self-righteous elder brother, our privilege and our calling is to rejoice over anyone who receives the grace of God and thus enters God’s kingdom. For the chief end of every human being is “to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever”.

It is easy for the “good” people, the righteous followers of the Law (in this telling, the Pharisees, Sadducees, lawyers and priests) to believe that their obedience makes them more preferred by God. It is a shock to find out that is not the case. God does not love us because we’re good. God loves us because it is in God’s nature to love. Therefore, anyone who responds to God’s grace is welcomed by God into His kingdom – whether that person has lived all his life in “dissolute living” or whether he has been obedient and faithful to God. Thus God will rejoice and calls us to rejoice over any person who becomes open to God’s grace. And God will grieve any of our ostracizing of people who respond to God’s grace because their former life doesn’t measure up to our expectations.

This is beautifully displayed in an exquisite play of language in this second part of the parable. The elder son, in complaining about the lack of attention he has received in the past, says to his father, “This son of yours . . .”. The father, in his gracious response to his elder son, replies, “We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours . . .”. The elder brother tries to distance himself from his brother by referring to him as “this son of yours”. The father won’t let him get away with distancing himself from his brother in this way. He responds “this brother of yours”, reminding the elder brother that this is not some stranger about whom they are talking, but the elder brother’s own “flesh and blood”. Therefore, rejoicing over his repentant return obviously is what the older brother is called to do.

It is also noteworthy that the father hears the hurt the elder brother is feeling. He begins his response by, in essence, saying, “Son, you know that I love you and appreciate your faithfulness to me. And you know that all I have is also yours. You don’t need to feel unappreciated or unloved. Nor do you need to compare yourself to your brother. My love is sufficient for both you and for your brother. My love for you is not reduced because I love your brother also, and am willing to forgive his sins. So join with me in rejoicing over the return of your brother. Embrace him as I embrace you. And welcome him back into this, our common household”.

The primary theme of this parable is on rejoicing and celebration in the light of God’s grace that welcomes us into God’s kingdom. This is signaled quite clearly in the text by the repetitive lines used at the close of each section of the story. In regards to the younger brother, the father says, “Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (15:24a). And at the close of the second part of this story, the father says to his eldest son, “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” (15:32).

Rejoice! For the prodigal son has come into God’s kingdom. And can the righteous, obedient brother be far behind?

This returns us to the opening lines of chapter fifteen of Luke. “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”. So Jesus told them this parable” (15:1-2).

Throughout most of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is quite harsh with the Pharisees and scribes, calling them to accountability and exposing their hypocrisy politically and economically, as well

as religiously. Here, however, one glimpses the compassion that Jesus has for these teachers of the Law who are concerned only with building their own power, prestige and position. As the father can hear the genuine intent of the elder brother lying behind his seemingly-unsympathetic response to his brother, so Jesus can hear the heart desire of many a Pharisee and scribe who would say to God, “All these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command”. Jesus would say to them, “My 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”. Jesus recognizes that many “leaders of the Law” are motivated as much by a love of God as they are for wealth, power and domination. So he would call forth the best in them, and have them embrace both their prodigal brothers and the prodigal inside themselves as well. By doing so, the leaders of Israel can open themselves to the same grace from God that those prodigals are discovering because they come to God with the honest appraisal of themselves, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son”. Yes, this fellow Jesus does welcome sinners and eats with them. And he calls the Pharisees and scribes to do the same – not to stand in judgment on them. For we are all sinners, we are all in need of God’s forgiveness and grace, and God is eagerly standing by any garden gate, seeking for his children to come home. Filled with compassion for them, God will run to them and throw his arms around them, kiss them and receive them into God’s kingdom – whether they are a repentant people or a responsive Pharisee!

II Corinthians 5:16-21 is one of the most remarkable and even definitive statements written by Paul the Apostle. It is also one of his most beautiful passages, as well. In this passage, the theme of grace presented so poignantly in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is articulated theologically. And it is a magnificent articulation.

It begins with the words, “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” (5:16).

Dominating all of Paul’s encounter with the Corinthian Church was their division into “warring camps”, each seeking control of the church and each seeking to impose their will and theological perspectives down upon the others. What Paul has sought to do in both of his letters to the Corinthians has been to remind them that they are, in reality, brother and sister in Christ – that the love of God brought to them through Christ is a stronger bond than the differences that have driven them apart. It is in this light of his overall message to the Corinthian Church that Paul reminds them that they need to not regard each other “from a human point of view” (literally, “according to the flesh”). That is, they should not look upon each other as holding political power or being oppressed, as having great wealth or as being poor, as being in control of the church or being servants of the powerful. Those are the ways that pagans look upon each other, judging each other’s worth by where they fit into the political, economic or religious hierarchies of life. Instead, Paul urges them to regard each other as brother and sister Christians – those for whom Christ died and who have responded to that redemptive death by embracing Christ and, consequently, each other.

But Paul quickly moves from this assertion to an assertion about Christ himself. He points out that, as a Jew, a Pharisee and a strict observer of the Law, Paul once regarded Christ “from a human point of view”. He saw Jesus as a charlatan, a rebel against the Jewish clergy aristocracy and Rome, and one who threatened the true faith. His previous knowledge of Christ was from outside the church and thus was hostile to both Jesus and to his church. But then Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and was converted there. And the result was that he now saw Jesus in an entirely different 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” (5:17-19).

This, of course, is the premier statement on reconciliation in the Bible. Paul chooses his words carefully. First, he does not say, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature” – as some translations put it (KJV, RSV, ESV). Rather, the Greek is better translated “there is a new creation” or “there is a new world” (NRSV, NEB, Jerusalem Bible). What Paul is declaring is that God has restored his creation, now deformed by sin, by re-creating it in Christ (Col. 1:15-20). It is not simply specific human beings who have been made into new creatures. It is that Christ’s atoning death has re-created the whole universe (Col. 1:19; II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1), and that includes all of human society – its political, economic, social, educational, and religious systems – and of humanity corporately, as well as the salvation of individuals. Christ’s death is for the *world* – not just for *individuals*!

So, if anyone has embraced Christ and been reconciled to God, then he or she has been brought into a whole new creation – the world as God intended it to be and created it to be. It is not so much that he or she has become a new creature, as it is that he or she has joined God’s re-creation of the world, and thus has become re-created, as well. Therefore, “everything old has passed away, and everything has become new”!

The redemptive work that God has done for the world and for humanity, Paul declares, is the work of reconciliation. The word “reconciliation” is from the Latin *reconciliatio*, which literally means, “to conciliate”. At the heart of the word is the concept of settling or resolving highly divisive differences. Reconciliation is not simply coming to agreement (that could just as likely be compromise as it could be resolution). Reconciliation is the restoring or establishing of loving fellowship and commitment to one another after severe estrangement. That is why the word is most often used to refer to the healing of a marriage, in which a husband and wife, who were at one time estranged from each other, not only simply get back together again and tolerate each other, but have reestablished their personal commitment to and fellowship with each other. In the best of reconciliation, it is as if that which once estranged them never happened!

This, Paul suggests, is what Jesus Christ did between God and God’s estranged world (including ourselves). Human beings, in their lust for power, greed and dominance, corrupted and rebelled against the world as God had created and intended it to be (a shalom society of political justice for all, economic equity for all and humanity in a loving relationship with God). They had, in

essence, pulled God off the throne of the world and had climbed up there themselves. But now, Jesus Christ through his suffering, death and resurrection had paid the penalty for the sin humanity had received for their estrangement against God and each other. And thus, it is through Christ's redemptive act that God and humanity – estranged from each other – are brought together again as if that estrangement had never happened at all.

Paul, in his enthusiasm for this theme, speaks carelessly. He writes, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18). Although it is a most pithy statement, it can easily be misinterpreted. One could read that sentence as suggesting that both God and we share in the task of providing forgiveness to humanity and restoration back to God. Therefore, Paul restates what he has just declared, in order to be more precise in what he actually means.

"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" (vs. 19). Now that is a much more precise statement. God reconciled the world to himself through the intervention of Christ – not through us. It was Christ's action that caused God to not count humanity's "trespasses against them". The work that was given to the church was not the work of co-redemption, but of proclamation. God had "entrusted the *message* of reconciliation to us".

Paul then concludes this definitive of all his statements regarding Christ's work of redemption. "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" (5:20-21). Our task, as the Body of Christ and as Christians, is to be "ambassadors for Christ" – those who represent their monarch before the "principalities and powers" of the world. And as ambassadors for Christ, our task is to urge both people and human systems to become "reconciled to God".

Normally, we read this passage as being purely an invitation to an evangelistic task to the pagans. But in reality, it is important to remind ourselves to whom this letter was written. It was written to those Corinthians who had already acknowledged and publicly confessed Jesus as their Lord and Savior and who had joined the church. That church was now rent with dissension, caused both by the party spirit of its constituents and by each person's need to be dominant. Paul is writing to Christians, not to pagans! And he is saying to those Christians, "we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (and thus, to each other). Your party spirit and your need for dominance has made of the Corinthian Church, not a foretaste of heaven, but an example of all that divides the world into the powerful and powerless, rich and poor, the dominating and the controlled. Rather than being a witness to the city of Corinth of God's desired order for humanity, you are nothing but a religious Xerox of the world! So you Corinthian Christians need to get right with God. You need to repent, for your actions have estranged you from God. And the only way you are going to be reconciled to God is for you to allow Christ to work in each of you and in all of you to bring you together again and to heal your internal breeches. Then, and only then, will you become those who are at peace with God!

So Paul concludes, "For our sake, God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (vs. 21). Here, Paul summarizes his message to the

Corinthian Christians, and in a larger sense, summarizes the entirety of the gospel in one single sentence. It is the gospel in a nutshell! We don't have to live our lives estranged from God nor estranged from each other. God has already acted through the death of Jesus Christ to impute our sin to Christ. Jesus took upon himself all the lust for power, greed and need for control, and our oppression, exploitation and sense of being dominated that drive all of our systems and us. Christ was our substitute, taking upon himself the penalty of all our sin.

But God also imputed to us Christ's righteousness. Paul not only wrote, "God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin". He also wrote, "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God". Through Christ's death, God counted Jesus' righteousness as belonging to us. We are right before God and thus right with each other and with the society we would build together, not because there is something intrinsically good about each of us, but because God has made us into "little Christs" (the literal meaning of the word, "Christian"). It is nothing that we deserve. It is nothing we have earned. It is all the freely given gift of God to us, acted out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. So, as "little Christs", let us now build the kind of church, the kind of city, and even the kind of world that God yearns for all of us to embrace. For that is what it means to be "ambassadors of Christ, God making his appeal through us to become reconciled to God"!

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)
(Cycle C Lent 4.doc)