

4th Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.27.22

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, 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. So 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

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 he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, “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 father 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.’”
(712)

I wonder where you are in this story.

I wonder if you're the older brother, the one who, like all oldest sons, was the rightful heir of his father's estate. He was the one who'd have received it all, so to ask for anything else was a violation of law and custom. He was one, though, who wouldn't have dreamed of asking for it ahead of time, not while his father was still alive, for to do such a thing would have been felt as wishing him dead.

I wonder if you're the older brother. Maybe you always do your duty, do what's expected and appropriate. And maybe you really like it this way. All that talk of forbidden pleasures: maybe you really like *unforbidden* pleasures, those simple, basic joys to be found in any given day. In the words of Adam Phillips, a psychotherapist and essayist, who has a whole book entitled as such, *unforbidden pleasures* are where much where real joy is found. That first cup of coffee in the morning: better than a cocaine bender. A trip to the movies with friends: better than a night in Vegas you can barely remember but ended with you married to a stranger. Maybe you're like that. A dog walk, a visit with your grandchildren, a good book, an hour in a beautiful room with words of love in the air.

Maybe, though, you know what it's like not to be invited to the party. Did you notice that? The older brother was still in fields working when, approaching the house, he heard the festivities—music, dancing.

They hadn't even bothered to invite him to the celebration.

Maybe they just figured he'd come in from his work eventually. He always did. He was reliable like that.

Whatever. That detail always bums me out.

I wonder if you're younger brother, the one who couldn't bear to stay within the bounds of the appropriate, one who maybe thinks such bounds of honor and shame are *too* binding. Always doing what's expected, lest you bring shame on your family name. Always doing what's right even when it's not right for you. We don't live much by honor and shame these days, not in the U.S. anyway. Live and let live: that's what we say. And good for us, in many respects.

This we largely have in common with those earlier gentiles. The ones in the early church, the ones the early church was beginning to attract and which the Jews of the early church were having to keep company with, these were people who'd lived amidst the inheritance of a loving,

creative God but who went their own way and did their own thing. They were late in being adopted into the ways of this loving God.

And this was the challenge facing 1st century Jews. Suddenly meant to understand that the God whom they'd been in exclusive covenant with was now making moves to go more global, theirs was, they long knew, a transcendent God, one who intended to appeal through the Jews to all the nations of the world. By their justice, the whole world would want in. By their righteousness, the whole world would take notice. Eventually, though, this would actually *mean* something, ask of them something—as all the people everywhere would be invited into the sheltering tent of God's enveloping love.

You know, congregations will often say they long for new members, but they seldom like it when new members don't conform to the old ways. "Join us, but don't change us," their signs ought to say.

The Jews had been there all along, laboring away, doing what's right. And now here came the gentiles, with their libertine ways, their weird habits of mind and body. Jesus had been sent as a light unto the gentiles. In Christ, God has multiplied the nation, has increased its joy, as the prophet Isaiah foresaw would happen. That's just the way of this God, expansive, expansive.

But, wait just a minute, say those who've been here all along.

I remember when Mark explained the difference between a party and a festival. A party is a gathering set apart from everyone else, a part of the whole but not the entirety. Hence the word, "party." A festival is a celebration that gathers everyone in, where the more truly is the merrier, where, like a potluck, the more who come the more feasting there is to share. A festival is to envelope the whole world because it is an in-time enactment of something more cosmic in scope.

The Jews had been having a party. God was now imagining a festival.

I had to make that shift once, but backwards. The boys' birthday celebrations: when they were very young, six or seven, we could simply open up the backyard, and invite all their little friends and all their friends' siblings over, and have cake and ice cream, and they would play. The swing-set. The sandbox. They stayed within the boundaries of the trees where the yard ends. Because they were little, they were still very concerned with staying near the grown-ups.

The year Tobias turned ten (I'm guessing here) and Jack was eight, and all their friends and all their siblings were around the same age, I remember standing near the house, looking out over the backyard, and realizing the swirl of activity was spinning far beyond the reach of the yard. They were going into the woods, up on the rocks, over the creek, into other yards. Bigger kids and

smaller kids, hyped up on sugar: a big brother of one of the little friends was a pied piper, though a well-meaning one, still a reckless one. And I realized I couldn't get them back, and that the loose boundaries of the assumed and the appropriate weren't holding anymore. Yet I was responsible—Jesse and me.

I remember the feeling of watching them spread out, their mania, their boundless joy at the possible, early spring, birthday cake, a wild game of tag their only concern. And I resolved that next year we'd have a clearer plan and clearer guest list. No older siblings, and no younger ones.

If everyone survived this year, that.

If our *reputations* survived this year, that is.

Maybe next year no one would come.

Maybe we'd prove to be the Typhoid Mary of birthday parties.

Lenox is a *small* town.

Luke was written by a gentile and for an increasingly Gentile church. That might seem obvious, that the church was largely gentile. But of course, the earliest Christians were Jews, and the earliest church was mostly a Jewish sect. As time rolled on though, and Paul in particular expanded his preaching beyond Jewish territory, well into gentile territory, the church became a syncretistic affair, a mixed marriage, a blended family. Fifty years on, Luke with his gospel, the one we're following through this liturgical year, presents the only biblical book by someone who wasn't a Jew—if you count that this book is but the first half of a whole book whose second half is Acts, the Acts of the Apostles. These taken together, as it seems they were meant to be taken, give us the only gentile voice of all the 66 books in the Bible as we Protestants know it.

This means central to Luke's agenda in writing his story of Jesus and the early church is making the church a welcoming place for gentiles.

But, how can that be? And I don't mean on the ideological level. I mean on the practical level. How can this *be*? How do you *do* that? How do you welcome in the lawless to join up with the rule-bound and well-disciplined? How do you seat side by side at a feast those who know to wash their hands before the meal and those who don't and whose hands have been, well, who knows where? This sort of mashup: it's stuff of comedy, when it isn't the stuff of tragedy or just a major headache.

I think of *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. These two terrible students, Bill and Ted, face a history project at the end of the school year. Knowing that to do the project as expected would be way beyond what they could manage, they obtain instead a time machine (as if this is easier). With

it, they gather up the actual people who were to be featured in the presentation. Hilarity ensues. When Billy the Kid and Beethoven share a backseat, hilarity ensues. When Joan of Arc meets Genghis Kahn, hilarity ensues.

It's likely, though, that the early church was less amusing.

That younger brother, the one you probably didn't figure you were much like: maybe that's you. Maybe that's us. We really don't have that many rules, so who knows what we're up to in all our unsupervised time...?

Or I wonder if you're the father, this one whose love for his sons made him practically silly. What was he thinking giving half his estate to his younger son? This, though the estate was rightly and wholly his older son's? This, though the father was still alive? His response to this scandal should have been shock, embarrassment, wrath and a punishing cutting off. But, no. He simply gave the younger son half his estate and then watched him prance merrily off with it, himself his own pied piper.

Maybe you're that guy, a fool for love.

I've been known to be taken as a fool.

Oh well. I guess I'd rather be known for that than for lots of other things.

The father doesn't seem to have reflected much on this situation, and how his boundlessness regarding his children seems to have made a bit of a mess of things.

I say this because when the younger son had come to himself and then made his way back to his father's home, the father, seeing him from far off coming, ran out to him. He *ran*. This, though no grown man would run in this culture. This, though to run would itself be to bring shame onto yourself and the whole situation.

Worse, then he went and had a huge feast for his son and all his son's friends and all their wild rumpus, along with his household and even his older son now coming in from the field, coming in from his constant work.

I wonder where you are in this story. It's a parable, which means we can wander around in the world it creates, wander around and wonder what it's all about and where we are in this world. It's one of three Jesus is remembered to have told here—one about a lost coin, whose owner at last found it; one about a lost sheep, whose shepherd at last found it; and one about a lost son, whose father ran out to meet him, as if he'd seen him all this time in his mind not from a human point of view from the point of view of Christ and the new creation. He regarded his son, lost in the

dissolute, regarded him as what he was becoming and not merely, flatly, as what he was during that time of being lost.

Paul, in writing to the churches in Corinth, sat as ever atop this fault line. The churches in Corinth were a bustling mess. The city, Corinth, was a bustling mess. A port town, it was a marketplace of the whole known world. People high and low, Jew and gentile, old and young, educated and illiterate all crowded into the congregations there, like the city itself. And by the time this second letter was in the works, which seems more to be a composite of several letters, conflict had begun to consume the congregations.

The people, as they were, were impossible.

But the people as they were becoming: in that there was hope.

I think this is what Paul meant in writing about not regarding anyone from a human point of view, instead regarding everyone from the point of view of the new creation. We are yet becoming.

We are yet becoming—so don't be so quick to give up on yourself. Don't be so quick to give up on someone else. And don't assume that God is quick to give up on us, or even slow to give up on us. Consider instead that God is more persistent in hope than we could possibly be persistent in the dissolute, God is more persistent in love than we could ever be persistent in resisting such love.

Consider the possibility that God's love is truly, ultimately irresistible.

You can try to run away. You won't manage to do it. Sorry. That's just the way love is.

Thanks be to God.