

March 17 2013

## Scripture Lessons

*2 Corinthians 5:16-21*

*Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*

Sermon      *The Ministry of Reconciliation*

**The old saying goes, sometimes familiarity breeds contempt and sometimes I think we take for granted, or ignore, or even despise that which we are most familiar. You can probably think of examples of that as well as I can. And that may be true of some of the basic stories, sayings and teachings of our faith.**

**The parable of the prodigal son is one such story that we sometimes, I think, take for granted. We have heard it so many times. We have heard about that wealthy father, insulted by the wayward son, who takes his inheritance before the father died. You have heard about the son who has squandered the inheritance and then is reduced to an even bigger insult, feeding pigs and eating their food. And finally we remember about the faithful brother, who is resentful, as he has steered a safe and steady course all of his life, feeling neglected as the father welcomes that wayward son back with open arms. And these closing words by that forgiving father to the faithful son, “Son you are always with me, all that is mine is yours, but we had to celebrate, we had to rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life, he was lost, but now he is found.”**

**Honestly we are indebted to St. Luke that we even have this story, because Luke’s gospel is the only place in the gospels that this story appears. Far from something that we ignore or that we consider on the sidelines, this parable and its message really, I think, lies in the heart of the good news and the gospel of Jesus Christ and is at the center of the journey of faith as Jesus followers.**

**And as St. Paul does not refer to this story per se, a lesson from Second Corinthians, he does sort of create a theological language that names what Jesus is getting at in this important parable of Luke’s gospel. Paul calls it the the ministry of reconciliation. Luke helps to connect this parable with St. Paul’s ministry of reconciliation, by setting the context for us. Jesus is reaching out to those in society who feel the need greatest for forgiveness, the greatest need for reconciliation with God and others; the tax collectors and the sinners, and in that process he is criticized for this ministry by those who feel they need the least forgiveness in their lives, by those who feel they feel the**

least recognized and helped by God, and who should be leading this ministry of reconciliation with all of their hearts instead.

Of course I am speaking about the religious leaders, people like me, the scribes, the Pharisees. In usual style Jesus turned the tables on those who think themselves rightest in this story by raising those who seem least rightest in God's sight. First of all he tells a short parable about the shepherd who risks everything, even his 99 sheep he has in hand, to find that one poor lost sheep. And then he follows it with another parable, the second parable about a woman who has 9 silver coins in her hand and who turns her house upside down to find that 10<sup>th</sup> coin that she cannot find.

In each case Jesus comments on how much joy will be celebrated in heaven over one special person who is forgiven and reconciled with God. Deliberately not mentioning the religious people who think they have forgiveness by God and others all sewn up in the bag, and finally comes that one/two punch, the parable of the prodigal son that hammers Jesus point home. God loves, God forgives, God has a place for anyone who seeks that love, who seeks that forgiveness, who seeks that place whether a long time religious person or someone with a much more checkered past. All are precious in God's sight and all should be welcomed by those of us who follow Jesus as part of our ministry of reconciliation.

St. Paul puts it so beautifully in this way in our lesson from Second Corinthians, so if anyone is in Jesus Christ there is a new creation, everything has passed away that is old and see, everything has become new. But what a hard concept to grasp, not only with our heads, but also with our hearts. What kind of a crazy God would ask a shepherd to ignore 99 sheep that he has in hand to go look for one lousy sheep. What kind of a crazy God would move a lady to go nuts in her house to go looking for a lost coin, when she has 9 coins in her hand? What kind of a crazy God would lead a father to forgive and take back an ungrateful lad of a son who had blown his entire inheritance, or for that matter ask any one of us sitting here today to forgive and to be reconciled with a child that we are estranged from, to a parent or a spouse, or to friends or to co-workers, or to church members who we have considered might have wronged us in the past.

But folks, isn't that the point why we are here each Sunday morning? Isn't that the elephant in the room that we often tend to ignore week after week? That nothing we do in life really matters if we are not reconciled to God? Nothing in life really matters if we are not reconciled to our brothers and sisters. St. Paul puts it this way, all this is from God who reconciles us to himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. And as a result Paul calls us as followers of Jesus, Ambassadors. That is,

**people whose job it is to represent God's love, represent God's mercy, and represent God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ to the whole world around us.**

**So I am sorry to say, I apologized that you and I are not here this morning for any other reason than that. We are not here because of this wonderful building, because of these wonderful windows, because of Chris' wonderful music although we appreciate it very much. We are not here because of our programs, and I hate to even admit this, we are not here because of my wonderful sermons, we are not even here because of the wonderful food that is waiting for us out in the fellowship hall, but instead we are here because we are Jesus' new creation, we are put on this earth to offer that same opportunity for reconciliation with God to everybody that we encounter in life. We were put on this earth to be Jesus' Ambassadors. We were put on this earth to be Jesus' representatives. We were put on this earth to be Jesus' disciples whose main task it is to be about God's ministry of reconciliation. So take the ministry of reconciliation with you this morning. Amen**