



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 4 (C)

Repentance and Reconciliation

[RCL] Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

During Lent, it can be easy to view the season of penitence as one focused on sin, separation, and shame. We can use Lenten disciplines as a way to self-flagellate, wear sackcloth and ashes, bear the crosses of giving up chocolate or committing to a new prayer practice. The word “penitence” itself comes from words that mean “not enough,” “missing,” or “lacking,” inviting us to the self-examination that will always shine light on our deficiencies. The tradition of Lenten penance draws on the example of Jesus’s 40 days of self-deprivation in the desert, but in our real lives, we might be able to relate to those 40 days beyond the season between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Likewise, we might also join in celebrating other aspects of Jesus’ life (beyond penance) during the season of Lent. The Scriptures today lend themselves to reflection and confession, but also lead us into the abundance of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Transformation or conversion can be a struggle. There’s a normal, then a liminal phase of change, turning, transition, and then a new, perhaps unsteady normal. That middle section is tricky, sometimes awkward, usually scary. It requires determination and discipline, as well as surrender and trust. But to repair the breach, we must enter it. To receive forgiveness, we must repent.

The story of Israel is written in the Book of Joshua as an explanation of origin. Here is where we were, here is where we then went, here is where we are now going. In chapter 5, we come upon Israel in that awkward, unsteady– or perhaps uneasy– liminal phase. The nation had finished wandering the desert, thereby completing their own 40 years of deprivation, generations before Jesus chose his own pilgrimage of 40 days in the desert. The exile of the nation of Israel could be interpreted as a symbol of punishment for the faithlessness of Israel in ignoring their covenant with God. But now, after the wandering, God fulfills the promise of restoring the people to Israel, and at Gilgal they celebrate.

Instead of living manna to manna, paycheck to paycheck, hopeful and trusting that food would emerge temporarily and daily from the earth as they had in the desert, the nation of Israel now feasts on the produce of the land. They eat the crops of the land of Canaan, planted by others and harvested by themselves, now the conquerors instead of the conquered. It’s a real come-back story. If the exile is read as a punishment for faithlessness, then the return to the Jordan is a sign of God’s favor and forgiveness. Israel

has paid their dues, twisted and turned through whining and gratitude, dragging and being dragged through the desert, and are rewarded with abundance, a literal feast.

Usually, the cause for repentance comes from ourselves. The power of evil always desires to separate us from one another, from God, and from ourselves, but we are given the freedom of choice to give in to that power or not. Sometimes it's intentional, acting out of ambition or selfishness or ego, and sometimes we look up and find ourselves lost, the sheep who wandered away from the herd. In whatever ways we sin or turn our backs on God, God is waiting to meet us when we return.

We turn and return, turn and return, in a cosmic dance of sin and repentance, met always by forgiveness. Much of Psalm 32 expresses the turmoil of shame and regret and angst one might feel when they are not following the path of Jesus. And snuck into the psalm, one little half-verse, is this: "Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin." Period. I confessed, then you forgave me. The point of self-examination is not to find fault, but to find fertile ground for transformation. Repentance is less about trying to nitpick our lives to find every shameful and sinful action we've ever done, and more about recognizing that God's love and mercy are vastly wider than God's anger. Where are we in a muddle, where can we invite mercy, where can God take root? What are the opportunities to turn and return? It's for good reason that we call the practice of saying individual confession "the rite of reconciliation" in our tradition. Books can be read on the subtle differences between reconciliation, reparations, and restitution, just as tomes are written on the comparisons of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. What is at times more relevant to the Christian life is the experience of brokenness, when repair is needed.

It is a big ask to loosen our grip on what we have. Whether resources have been earned or given, sharing them requires mutual respect and humility. The famous brothers in the story of the Prodigal Son (sometimes called the Parable of the Forgiving Father) provide us with a lifetime's worth of lessons. Jesus tells this story as an illustration for widening the table, loosening the grip on power. The religious leaders were grumbling about how Jesus shared meals with the lowlifes, the destitute, and shameful.

And in response, Jesus talks about two brothers. As it is written, the story invites us to compare the siblings as foils to each other, a "Goofus and Gallant" contrast. But thinking about the parable as an explanation of Jesus' behavior makes it problematic to think about the brothers as a dichotomy. Instead, we can think about the overarching theme of transformation. The younger brother, that "prodigal" son, leaves one normal day, experiences pain and mess and desperation, and returns—returns repentant. The elder brother has elegantly entered a new normal when his brother departed, diligently doing his work and assuming the responsibility of a loyal heir. His brother's return interrupts this and forces a new normal on him, one which is jarring and uncomfortable. He leaves the party, entering his own liminal space between what was and what will be.

The father, who easily stands in as the Savior or the Creator or some other divine entity of love, does not stand idly by as his sons grapple with their identities and struggles and roles in the family system. The father steps into the liminal space to meet his sons— he runs out to welcome his youngest son home. He

removes himself from party preparation to meet his eldest. The parent meets the child amid the mess and change and awkwardness. The parent does not wait until the child has figured themselves out, but reaches out and accompanies them through the repentance, the return, and the transformation.

In the rabbinic literature of *Pesikta Rabbati* (a collection of commentary on certain Hebrew scriptures), the story of reaching and return is summed up like this:

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, "Return to your father." He said, "I cannot." Then his father sent word, "Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you." So God says, "Return to me, and I will return to you."

The child needs to go through the journey of repentance, restitution, and reparation in order to repair the breach but is always met with accompaniment and hospitality, just as God always meets us with forgiveness.

Forgiveness from God is a clean slate, no grudges kind of love, but human reconciliation requires sacrifice. We are reconciled to God in Christ, and so we must live out the same ministry of reconciliation. The self-examination offered to us during the season of Lent ought to reveal the transformation that comes from repentance, sacrifice, and forgiveness. Reconciliation, Repair, Restitution, Reparations—and all the other “re” words—make up a twisty-turny dance of liminality and transformation. May we all follow the road of humility and reflection. And may we all be met with God’s abundance.

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