

Lutheran Church of the Master
580 Kuhn Road, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188
Curt Gerald, Interim Pastor
March 13/14, 2010
Fourth Sunday in Lent
“Called to Celebrate with Jesus”

Lent is the time for coming home. In the ancient church it was the season for reconciling lapsed Christians to the community of the faithful. Today's readings provide images of homecoming—Israel's entry into the land of promise, a prodigal son who returned to his waiting father.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of compassion, you welcome the wayward, and you embrace us all with your mercy. By our baptism clothe us with garments of your grace, and feed us at the table of your love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, whom with you and the Holy Spirit we worship and praise, one God, now and forever.

C Amen.

FIRST READING *Joshua 5:9–12*

⁹ The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

¹⁰ While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. ¹¹ On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. ¹² The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

PSALM *Psalms 32*

Happy are they whose transgressions | are forgiven,*
and whose sin is | put away!

**²Happy are they to whom the LORD im- | putes no guilt,*
and in whose spirit there | is no guile!**

³While I held my tongue, my bones with- | ered away,*
because of my groaning | all day long.

**⁴For your hand was heavy upon me | day and night;*
my moisture was dried up as in the | heat of summer. R**

⁵Then I acknowledged my | sin to you,*
and did not con- | ceal my guilt.

**⁶I said, "I will confess my transgressions | to the LORD."*
Then you forgave me the guilt | of my sin.**

⁷Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in | time of trouble;*
when the great waters overflow, they | shall not reach them.

**⁸You are my hiding-place; you preserve | me from trouble;*
you surround me with shouts | of deliverance. R**

⁹"I will instruct you and teach you in the way that | you should go;*
I will guide you | with my eye.

**¹⁰Do not be like horse or mule, which have no | understanding;*
who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will | not stay near you."**

¹¹Great are the tribulations | of the wicked;*
but mercy embraces those who trust | in the LORD.

**¹²Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice | in the LORD;*
shout for joy, all who are | true of heart. R**

SECOND READING *2 Corinthians 5:16–21*

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

GOSPEL *Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32*

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable: ¹¹ There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ 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! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.' ²² 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. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But when this son of

yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² 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.'"

The Journey Continues ... the journey called Lent ...

On the First Sunday in Lent (February 21), we were reminded that the Good News always starts in Scripture ... this book certainly isn't about us ... but the point is that it is for us! That book tells us the Good News planted in human history about 4,000 years ago with the call of Abram that traveled through Jesus whose birth we celebrated at Christmas, whose baptism we celebrated as we moved from Christmas into Epiphany, and whose transfiguration we remembered as we moved from Epiphany into Lent.

On the Second Sunday in Lent (February 28), we heard what is at the center of it all: Good News always starts in Christ. Like a prize fighter entering the ring ... Jesus marches to the fight ... but without gloves, without protectors, and without a punch ... the only strength he has is the power of God ... and though the opponent seems to win by a knock-out, the opponent doesn't have a chance because the victory is already won! That is why it is all about Jesus and not about you and not about me. There is nothing left for us to do! That may be disappointing ... but hopefully that is also good news! You and I don't have to earn our salvation by pilgrimages or self-flagellation, starvation diets or self-sacrifice, acts of piety or acts of almsgiving, we don't have to worry about buying our way out of purgatory, earning our way out of damnation, living according to the alphabetical ABCs of salvation, or any other man-made, church-decreed, institutionalized or canonized set of decrees ... because salvation isn't about us ... it is for us.

Last Sunday on the Third Sunday in Lent (March 7), we were reminded that the Good News includes a second chance ... well, actually, numerous second chances. I guess we could say, that the only time second chances end are when we have taken our last breath ... and then, who knows, the God who created second chances might still have a surprise in store for us anyway! And of course, that has nothing to do with our wealth, prestige, fame, or anything like that ... but that it is a free gift given through a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

So today we are reminded that The Good News Always Starts in Welcome. "But while he (the younger son, who has just wasted his inheritance and is coming home ready to be a slave on his dad's farm because he knows he is unworthy of being treated as a son) was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him ... and gave him a robe ... a ring ... and sandals." WOW ... that is what I would call a welcome home.

Is that the image of God that you have? You probably understand the picture of the younger son ... who of us hasn't been there? I blew it ... I goofed ... I made serious mistakes ... I am not worthy ... I ... I ... !

But love looks through a telescope to welcome us home ... it doesn't look through a microscope to nit-pick and make things even worse. Love comes running to welcome the sinner home. Did you note that? The younger son ... the sinner ... didn't come running home? We get the picture in this story that he comes home looking like a puppy after you've yelled at it for chewing your shoe apart ... head down ... hunched over in shame ... as though dragging his body to a place of punishment ... which he knows he deserves.

But the father in this parable ... who has to represent God ... the father comes running with tears of joy running down his cheeks saying: "My son, my son ... you've come home ... you've come home ... you just made

my day ... I've been waiting for you ... I couldn't sleep while you were away ... how are you? What do you need? What can I do for you? You must be cold ... here is a coat. Your feet ... they're bleeding and dirty ... here, put on these shoes! When I saw you coming, I sent an email to the family ... they're all coming over to join us for dinner ... we're going to celebrate ... because you're home!"

Instead of a whipping he got a welcome;
instead of becoming a hired hand he wears his dad's ring;
instead of punishment his privileges are restored;
instead of crawling home he is carried home;
instead of condemnation he receives a celebration.

And do you think God loves you any less? Is there anyone here this morning who can top the story of that younger son? Is there anyone here this morning for whom this doesn't apply?

You know, this Jesus is just plain revolutionary in what he says about God ... the idea that God comes running to welcome us into the kingdom ... it is absurd ... but it is wonderful ... and it is true! That is the Good News ... The Good News that starts in Scripture in the Story of Jesus and in this story of Welcome.

Of course we know that there is another son ... **MR. SOCK IT TO HIM BECAUSE I'VE EARNED EVERYTHING I'VE EVER GOTTEN** ... Jesus never liked the self-righteous attitudes of the religious community ... he knew that there were those who wanted to earn their way by following the ABCs of salvation ... who wanted to teach Works Righteousness 101 in confirmation ... those who loved to dig into peoples' backgrounds because they knew if you'd scratch deep enough you'd find flaws, failures, and fantastic faults ...

The younger brother knew all about home coming and being welcomed ... the father knew all about home coming and welcoming someone home ... but the older brother ... he seems to have difficulty with the concept ... he isn't glad to see his brother come home ... he is upset that his Dad welcomed his brother home ... and there is nothing welcoming in his actions at all ... because, after all, he had never left home in the first place ... he was "MR GOODY TWO SHOES" ... but notice how the text indicates that while the younger brother had been away, the older brother had been imagining all sorts of things which HE would have liked to have done ... so he accuses his brother of doing them ... even though the text doesn't say that the younger brother had actually done them. As a matter of fact, the text goes out of its way to say that the younger brother had ended up in the pig pen (remember: this is a story told to Jewish folks ... and you do remember how they feel about pigs, pork, bacon, and all that).

The younger brother is certainly the object of celebration (as every saint/sinner is in the Kingdom of God) ... and the father is certainly the party thrower (can you imagine a greater party than the one that is going to last for an eternity?) ...

But the older brother ... if you were telling this parable ... how would you write the ending ... what literary devices would you use to turn this grumpy old works-righteous-judgemental-fundamentalist-self-ordained-little-god into a party person?

How about understanding what forgiveness is about. Just like we said on Wednesday evening when we were talking about the 5th petition of the Lord's Prayer: "and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

CAUTION: DO NOT PRAY THIS PETITION IF YOU ARE HOLDING A GRUDGE AGAINST ANYONE ELSE BECAUSE IN THIS PETITION

YOU ARE PERMITTING ... YOU ARE ASKING ... GOD TO TREAT YOU THE SAME WAY YOU TREAT EVERYONE ELSE.

Jesus had a better way: forgiveness ... and then welcome.

1 John 1:9 - "...if we admit our sins - he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing." (THE MESSAGE)

And those who have been forgiven are the ones who sing today's psalm ... "happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven."

Welcome to "Forgiven R Us" ... just as all are welcomed to this communion table today ... so have we all been welcomed and invited into the Kingdom. The lost have been found! There is a celebration going on in heaven ... over you!