



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 31, 2019  
JOSHUA 5:9-12; PSALM 32; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21; LUKE 15:1-3, 11B-32

## THE FLOW OF THINGS

On Thursday, Chris and I returned from a 10 day trip to Japan. Most of the time we spent on retreat hiking in the mountains of Wakayama Prefecture. Located about three hours south of Kyoto, Wakayama is considered by many to be the spiritual heart of Japan. There, a series of ancient pilgrimage routes traverse rugged mountains. Those trails guide pilgrims and tourists alike from the bustle of the city into holy, mystical places hidden in the heart of rural Japan.

Like the Cascades and Olympics, the majesty of God's creation is palatable there. But what remains most memorable right now is something else. As we made our way through the mountains, evidence of human intervention, really something more like human tinkering, could be found everywhere. Cobblestone steps lined parts of

the trail. Layers of plaster coated steep hillsides like frosting on a cake. And then there were the dams. Even in the middle of remote forests, elaborate concrete barriers controlled the flow of water from tiny streams.

Certainly, there was a purpose for all these things. After all, typhoons regularly wreak havoc on the landscape. Then there are earthquakes that cause a different kind of chaos. But all of the human-made things all left me to wonder about the point of our human interventions. When do our efforts help and when do they hinder the great ways of God?

The readings today give some perspective. Jesus tells the learned people of the synagogue a story. It is the story of a family.

First, there is a younger sibling. Like many little brothers, he is hell bent on doing things his own way. He has the audacity to ask for something that is not his to request. Then, to everyone's amazement, he receives it. His good fortune is intoxicating, and like any powerful drug, it doesn't take long for him to become addicted. Not until he hits rock bottom does he sober up. Only then does he realize how lost he is and how much he longs for home.

Then there is the older sibling. Like many older sisters, this sibling is duty bound and eager to please. She is serious about her obligations to the family. She carefully attends to those responsibilities and to everyone else's expectations of her. She is just as lost as her wayward brother, but unlike her brother, she doesn't know it yet. Instead, she knows anger and resentment. It's the kind that wells up inside when an internal conflict rages...the kind fueled by an ego that it fights to keep control while the true self longs to be set free.

The parable of the prodigal son is more than a masterful story. It resonates because we know this story in our bones. This is not just any family story. It is our story. It gives voice to the challenges and joys you and I experience every day in our lives. It wouldn't surprise me if, even as you listened to the

Gospel today, many of you felt some affinity for at least one of the siblings.

But to stay focused on the siblings is to miss something. Staying there means focusing on our brokenness rather than on the wholeness inherent in all of us. Staying there means staying stuck on the cross rather than being willing to enter the tomb of transformation. Staying there means relying solely on human intervention as the way to salvation.

That's where the parent of the parable comes in. He is the father who knows that unless a child is given freedom to make mistakes, that child can never grow up. She is the mother who gives thanks for the responsible child. She also longs for that same child to find his own happiness separate from everyone else's. Together, they are the ones who do everything in their power to keep the family together and to keep their home a safe place.

Reconciliation is at the heart of this story. Jesus wants us to know it is the kind of reconciliation that cannot be legislated or hoarded by a few. Instead, it is a gift offered freely by God to all people in all times and in all places. Where acceptance and generosity flow freely, so does reconciliation. Where forgiveness and compassion are practiced, so, too, is this reconciling love of God.

When Jesus tells the learned people of the synagogue this parable, he wants them know

this: everyone, where-ever they are on their journey of faith, is worthy of the reconciling love of God. Everyone also has the capacity *and* the responsibility to practice that same reconciling love. As Saint Paul so eloquently points out, that's what it means to be an ambassador of Christ. No exceptions.

But this work of reconciliation is not easy, and it is not ours alone to do. In this Lenten season when repentance and forgiveness are at the forefront of our spiritual work, it's doubly important to stress this -- how difficult the work of reconciliation is.

This is a season when we are invited, really urged, to dig way beyond the surface, to name and assess what truly troubles us and the world. As Henri Nouwen says, it is a time to let our sins and the sins of the world pierce our souls, so we can feel that pain and then grieve the harm caused to ourselves and others.<sup>1</sup> That's how we discover just how far out of balance we are with God and each other. That's what self-examination is, and it's where our engagement is essential. But that's not the end of our Lenten discipline. To stop there would be to dwell only on brokenness and resist the possibility of grace.

Forgiveness is a natural outgrowth of self-examination, and it is the next step on the road to reconciliation. As the psalmist says, forgiveness is about freedom from all that eats us alive from the inside out. Forgiveness is about breaking down the dams we build to numb ourselves from the pains and joys of the world. I want to be clear. Forgiveness is not about forgetting. Instead, it is about being set free from confusion and regret and bitterness that cripple our souls. It's about restoring the divine flow of things in and through our lives.

To forgive also means that at some point, we must let go and let God take care of the rest. To forgive means walking away from those things that have power over us and trusting that somehow, God will transform them into something new. Letting go breaks the dam. Letting go allows God to flow freely through our lives once again. In the words of Parker Palmer, letting go helps forgiveness flow like a river between us.<sup>2</sup> That's when real reconciliation is possible.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says that he goes ahead of us to prepare a place for us. When Thomas asks how we will know the way, Jesus says to all of us that he is the way, the truth,

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<sup>1</sup>Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York, NY: Image, 1994), 128-129.

<sup>2</sup>See <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/literacy-world-features/view/15807>.

[features/view/15807](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/literacy-world-features/view/15807). That prayer is also used as the Lord's Prayer at the 7pm Sunday evening Contemplative Eucharist at Saint Mark's Cathedral.

and the life. That way to God is not an exclusive club available to only a few people. It is not protected by an impenetrable border wall constructed to keep people out who Jesus doesn't like. Instead, the way of God is the way where all people are welcomed and affirmed as good. It is a way of life where forgiveness and reconciliation flow freely. It is the way we are called to follow now and always.

Today, right now, know that you are forgiven, and be at peace. When you go, extend that same forgiveness and peace to everyone you encounter. That's how God flows through you and me.

AMEN.

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

*"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.' "*