

Grace & Peace from God our Father & Our Lord & Savior, Jesus Christ.

Along my spiritual journey, I like to say, “*When I was 19 I turned the world over to Jesus because I came to the undeniable conclusion that the world was broken beyond my – or anyone else’s ability to fix.*”

Now, this sounds silly, but ... ***There comes a time in every new pastor’s life when he or she has to come to terms with the fact that they are not Jesus.*** Try as we might to love and serve and forgive, there are moments when you realize ***that you are no better than the worst sinner – worse in fact, because you know better.*** We can delude ourselves for some time, or simply avoid looking at that truth. But, at some point you have to admit that at least a part of you wanted to be a pastor because Jesus and the Church were your safe place where you were loved and accepted, and you hoped that if you became the pastor you’d always be “living that dream.”

But ***somewhere in every new pastor’s ministry we come to the inescapable conclusion that most of the caring, loving and forgiving you are called to do is a one-way street headed away from where you live.*** Actually, we shouldn’t be surprised, since ***all Jesus’ selfless caring,*** healing, loving, and forgiving ***only lead Him to a cross.*** Why should we expect anything different? But somehow we hope things will turn out better for us.

These moments ought to confront us every day. The same is true for every Christian, or else we become the odious Christian who judges others more harshly than ourselves.

For me at the next milestone along my spiritual journey, I like to say

*“When I was 29 I realized I had to turn myself over to Jesus because I came to the undeniable conclusion that **I** was broken beyond my – or anyone else’s ability to fix.”* After three years in ministry, I had a dramatic moment of reckoning – a nervous breakdown, actually. It forced me to admit that the path I had taken hoping it would fill me up, had left me completely depleted. I realized that after all that pastoring, I felt more alone than I had in my entire life.

Sara – my wife, who is chaplain at the Lutheran Home in Tacoma – told me a story about forgiveness yesterday. A woman who lives there related that shortly after she was confirmed, she and her father were out on the fields running the binding machine; her father was on the tractor and she standing up the sheaves. Suddenly the tractor stopped, and she looked over to find her father sobbing uncontrollably. She asked him what was wrong, and he said that he was guilty of a sin so grievous that it couldn’t be forgiven. She didn’t inquire about the sin, but then and there by the tractor, she made her father get off of the tractor, and as they knelt together. She prayed that the Holy Spirit would bring her father to confess the sin to the Lord, and that God would forgive her father for whatever sin burdened him so. That is the power of confession.

There is a moment just like this in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son when the young man “comes to himself” and realizes that he would be better off as a slave in his father’s house than where his choices have led, sets the stage for the climax of the parable. He admits to himself:

*¹⁷ When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!’¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: **Father, I have***

sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’

It seems fairly clear to me that the climax of Jesus’ parable is the father’s unconditional and lavish welcome to his returning son. *Yet, that moment of welcome could never have occurred had the son’s critical self-realization not occurred.* The fact that Jesus includes the young man’s inner confession as a monologue – Jesus doesn’t usually tell us what people are thinking – testifies to its essential role in the rest of the parable.

Even though he never completes his confession in his father’s presence, we see his repentance, which Luke includes in every detail.

"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."

Admitting that he has selfishly hurt his Father and done what is wrong, *he acknowledges that he has no right to be treated as anything more than the lowest member of the household* if his father will be merciful.

The fact that we know the content of the confession his father never allows him to finish, *reveals something about both the son and the father.*

About his father, we learn that *his self-indulgent son’s confession does not lead to his graciousness, mercy and love*; these qualities, which yield his gracious welcome are *simply the father nature*. As for the son, *the son now knows that he is no better than anyone else*, and is not entitled to better treatment than anyone else in his father’s house; as such *everyone is entitled to the same gracious acceptance that he receives.*

The second part of the parable where the older brother refuses to join the feast celebrating his brother’s safe return only serves to illustrate what it looks like when we continue to feel more entitled than others to

the father's love. Frankly, it's not very attractive, and the older brother ends up looking like as much of a jerk as the younger had when he selfishly abandoned the household and spent his inheritance.

What does Jesus want to convey to us with this parable and the two before it about celebrating the finding of the lost sheep and coin. I think it is this. Having accepted, acknowledged and confessed our failure to God and before one another, none of us can exclude anyone outside of God's grace, and our only option is to mercifully accept them in grace no matter how much their behavior may offend us, or how egregious their lifestyle is to us. If our heavenly father welcomes them, we – meriting no more standing in God's house than the lowest servant – certainly have no grounds to exclude, judge or hold ourselves apart from the celebration of their homecoming.

We need to admit that if anyone would be entitled to count Himself better than the rest of us it would be Jesus, and yet He comes to the feast. No, He host the feast Himself and each week welcomes us back into the household of faith.

Should we choose not to join in the celebration of the finding of the lost, we will find ourselves outside the celebration and separated from the source of love that we seek. Remember, if it ever comes to a situation when we begin seeing the world as US and THEM – no matter who the US and THEM may be – Jesus will always be with them; always.

It is never easy to own our own selfish nature: our sense of entitlement, deserving the good things in our lives more than others, judgment of other people choices, etc. The payoff, however, for doing so is discovering oneself happily celebrating God's goodness with God's

children. And whether we are the sole heir to all things or not – as the older brother now is – being superior, alone and miserable will always be a sad alternative to being at the feast.

Remember that 13 year old girl who knelt by the tractor and prayed with her father? When her father was on his death bed, he told her that he'd never forgotten how she had reminded him of God's mercy and forgiveness that day, and freed him from his burden that day. What a legacy. That's how I'd like to be remembered. How about ?

AMEN !!!