

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“Reconciled”

Part IV of the Sermon Series, “Lift High the Cross”

Luke 15:11-32, Luke 23:32-34a

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¹¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son

gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses 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 as 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 assets 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.’ ”

Our other passage is the prayer prayed from the cross:

“Father, forgiven them, for they know not what they do.”

The Chapel of the Prodigal sits on the edge of the Montreat College campus. It has its name because of the beautiful fresco on the chancel wall. Ben Long, portrays the parable with rich, vibrant colors. He does a remarkable thing. Normally God is identified with the Father. Long adds the mother to the scene. Now, to understand God’s love, you can look at both the father and the mother.

More to the point, look at the father’s arms and the mother’s eyes.

The father’s arms: one raised in praise and the other draped around his son who is in a crumbled heap,

- physically spent from the weakness of starvation and the journey home,



- spiritually spent from humiliation and shame.

This son's healing has begun because of his father's embrace.

The father's embrace of the son is all that is needed to provide a powerful backdrop in a chapel meant for the proclamation of the Gospel. But Long's portrayal of the parable has greater depth when you see the mother as an equal partner. While the father is embracing the younger son, the mother's eyes are fixed on the older son. Her eyes bridge the distance the son has created by standing apart in righteous indignation that this disgrace he refuses to acknowledge as a brother is called a son, is welcomed home, and is going to be honored with a feast.

Long beautifully captures the portrayal of God's love in the parable. Both sons can't seem to be in the same place at the same time. When one son is near, the other is at a distance. At the moment of reconciliation there is a moment of estrangement... because reconciliation with the father always has to do with reconciliation with each other. Even when the parent's heart rejoices, it also finds reason to worry.

Some of you worshipping in this sanctuary or worshiping online know what that is like. It can be a wedding or even a memorial service when a life is to be celebrated. It is a time to celebrate, but there is

that child—
that parent—
that sibling—
that uncle or cousin—

who stays away in pout or protest,
or who carries into the celebration some judgement or indignation,
some grudge.

Your heart is divided, both celebrating and longing.

That's the life of love, don't you think?

I certainly think that is the life of those who follow Jesus. It is the life of the cross, which is hinted at in the fresco as the slaughtered lamp hangs from a T-shaped structure. The cross is the intersection

of the vertical embrace of God's unconditional love,
and the horizontal work of reconciliation that heals what is broken.

Once you understand that about the cross—
once you understand that it reveals both the separation of sin
and the embrace of reconciliation,
you begin to see the cross everywhere.

For instance, on my trip to Israel...

You knew I was going to mention my trip to Israel, didn't you? I told the group I was with that in every sermon written by a preacher after going to Israel is going to have the phrase, "When I was in Israel..." or maybe "When I was in the Holy Land."

Why should I be different?



When I was in the Holy Land the past two weeks, it seemed everywhere I looked I could see the contrast between the reconciliation we already have and celebrate and the reconciliation that still needs to take place. I can offer just one day as an example.

On the day I am thinking of, we went to the spot on the Jordan River where it is thought Jesus may have been baptized. I posted about this on Facebook. It is a spot where “the river” has become no more than a shallow stream. The river serves as a border between Jordan and Israel and Armed guards are on both sides to make sure that the border is not crossed. The relationship between Jordan and Israel is tense and needs reconciliation.

So, people do not cross the shallow river that is the Jordan. Yet they enter the river from both sides,

to be baptized

or to remember their baptism,

in the faith where there is neither Jew and Gentile,

because we are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That the division of nations is symbolically, and sometimes truly, washed away in baptism is something to be celebrated.

The same day we went to Bethlehem,

the site of Jesus’ birth,

the place where it is celebrated,

that God so loved the entire world that he became flesh

and lived among us.

You may have heard about the fences that were erected to keep Palestinians and Jews separated. In Bethlehem, it is not a fence which sounds temporary. It is actually a high, thick, concrete wall meant to last. There is the divide our sin creates, and one longs for the day when that wall will come down.

Yet, while we were in Bethlehem, we visited Dar al-Kalima University which was founded in 2006, a year after that wall was finished. We heard from the university’s president who is also its founder, the Rev. Mitri Raheb. He started the university to expand the intellectual and creative horizons for young Palestinians who are physically restricted to a city with little green space. This university is Rev. Raheb’s strategy for ultimate peace and reconciliation. At lunch, we saw some of the students sitting around tables visiting and laughing as students everywhere do. It was a cause for celebration.

We ended the day by returning to Jerusalem. We entered a church built in the Garden of Gethsemane; built over a rock where it is thought Jesus, knowing he faced arrest and execution, prayed for the cup to be taken from him. The church has 14 domes making for remarkable acoustics. Mass was being held and we heard an amazing soloist. The song was in Latin but the stunning beauty of the meditative song was like a prayer for peace. In hearing it, it was almost as if peace had already come.

Every day was like that in Israel. Every day gave us reasons

- to celebrate God’s love



- and reasons to pray for God to work reconciliation and bridge sinful divides.

We call Israel “the Holy Land” because it served as the geographical canvas for most of the stories of the Bible. However, I came away with an even stronger conviction that Israel is neither more nor less holy than anywhere else where humans give cause for both gladness and lament. Ed McLeod, the leader of our trip, quoted to us Wendell Berry who said that “there are only two kinds of land...sacred and desecrated.” Berry thought all land was holy until we rendered it otherwise.

I love that. But in light of our parable and even more in the shadow of the cross, we might say the same thing in a different way. Perhaps land can be sacred and desecrated at the same time. The intersection is the truth of the cross, that the holiness of God intersects with the sins that divide us.... and the reason the intersection takes place is God’s love.

A lot of thought should be given by each of us as to what that means in our own individual lives when we answer Christ’s call to take up the cross and follow him when it comes to the fissures that are within us and among us. But on this day when we ordain and install elders to lead this church, we might think together what it means to be the body of Christ.

How can we embrace each other within the church
as the Father

embraces the son,
loving each other despite our flaws?

And how can we have the eyes of the mother
in looking past the church walls
at the divides in the world that need to be bridged?

How can we show the world
the vertical love that embraces us,
and the horizontal love that works to heal divides?

How can we be our own Chapel of the Prodigal
that can give thanks for what we have,
and work for what needs to happen, at the same time?

In short,
how can we be the church
that lifts the cross that celebrates a vertical love that is unconditional
and a horizontal love that reconciles?

It will be the responsibility of our session to regularly ask those questions in leading us as a body. It is our shared responsibility to answer those questions in the how we worship and witness together.

