



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual
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“Making Up”

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

On this fourth Sunday in the season of Lent, as we follow Jesus through his ministry to the Cross, we come to one of the most famous stories Jesus ever told. Open your Bibles with me to Luke’s gospel, chapter 15. There are three parables here, and we’ll take on the third one today. It’s the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Now this is a very familiar story. And, of course, that makes hearing it again, risky. The risk is, we’ll hear it and nod at its familiarity. We know the story. But do we know ourselves in the story? THAT’S the kind of conversation God wants to have with us this morning, as we listen for His voice in Luke 15.

[text]

There are so many reasons this story sticks with us. At other times, I’ve gone into the cultural details that made this story so powerful for the first hearers, that they wanted to remember it for sure, and Luke talked to these people when he was putting together his written, orderly account. The father, for example, is outrageously generous. But when he runs to his son, he humiliates himself. Dressed in a rich robe, he has to hike it up and show his bare legs in order to get to his returning son quickly. That was a shameful act for a clan patriarch. But the urgency of getting to this boy was so great, the father was willing to humiliate himself. And why was it so urgent? Well, we probably get the deep longing of the father for this son’s return. But what we might not get is that the village where this family lives is a clan, or tribal village. Think of tribal warfare in Iraq, and you begin to touch on the intensity of a tribe enforcing its rules and customs. The rest of the village knows what this younger son has done—basically, he’s told his father to ‘drop dead so I can have my inheritance’. The Hebrew Law of Moses, in Exodus 21:17 decreed, “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.” Telling your father to ‘drop dead’—that sounds like curse to me, and no doubt did also to that village. So if others in the village see this (MMM MMM) of a son coming up the road, they are likely to gather a mob and stone him. So in addition to the fulfillment of this father’s deep desires for reconciliation with his boy, he runs out to his son to protect him from the mob that would soon gather around and stone the boy. Got the picture Jesus wanted you to get? Good!

Now, let’s hear the Apostle Paul write to his friends at Corinth, that wild seaport town in Greece. The churches there were made up of Corinthians—can you believe it? And while they had come to Christ for salvation, they still were full of themselves, and their culture and its quarrelsome ways. So in that context, Paul writes his second letter (or, as many scholars think, his third, after a lost second letter we don’t have). Listen how important God takes our relationship with Him, and listen for God’s voice to you this morning. *[text]*

Finally, here is a poignant moment from a pivotal part of the Hebrew Bible, from the book of Joshua, chapter 5, starting at verse 9. God has liberated His people from slavery in Egypt, taken them across the wilderness under Moses' leadership. Moses died on that side of the Jordan river, and God appointed Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land. So far in this book, the people have crossed the Jordan river with another sign from God. And now God speaks to Joshua at the start of what will be a long campaign to take the land God has appointed for His people. Listen for how you are in this text today, and how God is speaking to you. *[text]*

Now, this is more Scripture than we usually read on a Sunday, from several sources. Each has its context, and deserves its own focus. But the church has suggested these three texts be read together on this fourth Sunday in Lent, so that we would have a clear idea of one of the most important reasons Jesus was sent to live and die for us. And it involves God, intimately.

Think of these three texts. What do they tell us about God? . . .

I'm sorry this is not a Bible study, for I'd stop here and get your ideas. But what I see is this: God cares incredibly much about our relationship with Him. God loves us with a love that we can barely touch.

In the Joshua text, God shows again He has been leading His people all along. God—like the Father He is—has the desire and the power to remove shame. I'd never come across this text in all the years I'd struggled with shame I picked up in my own family. But through other texts and God showing up in my life, God has removed my shame from me—that's a testimony of "God in my life", and it's been huge for me, as God continues to do a healing work in me. God removed the shame of slavery from His people, and God wants to remove shame from His people today. But to get that healing, we have to come to God, live in God, remain in God, and let God live in and through us. Keep this sticky note of God removing shame as one specific example of God's love, God's initiative of love for His people.

In Paul's words, he puts in declarative prose what the narratives of Joshua and of Jesus communicate in story. God is out to not just forgive, but to reconcile us to Him.

What's the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation? Forgiveness is an action between two equal parties. In the Bible, where everyone lived in villages and small towns, it includes the idea of ongoing relationship, not just a decision not to carry on a conflict. [We'll come back to this, because I'm not sure we view forgiveness in the same way.]

Reconciliation, however, preserves the idea of unequal parties. As Paul tells us, God takes the initiative to reconcile us to himself.

"([God] doesn't move; we do.) Yet there can be no question that in reconciliation more takes place than a mere removal of the relationship of guilt. God has sent to men His messengers through whom He addresses men and who beseech them for Christ's sake: "Be ye reconciled to God" (2 C. 5:20). Through the revelation of the superabounding love of God which did not find the sacrifice of the Son too great, and which does not regard it as too humiliating to plead with men, we are renewed in the total state of our life. [Now] the love of Christ controls us, according to 2 C. 5:14. We no longer live for ourselves, but for the One who died for us and was

raised again (v. 15). We judge that we have died like all others and are new creatures. By reconciliation our sinful self-seeking is overcome and the fellowship with God is created in which it is replaced by living for Christ.” *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (1:255). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans—emphasis and minor edits, mine.

I hope I’ve made this clear, this distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. But in the story Jesus told, we get a narrative picture of how God behaves, and thus what God cares so much about. If God is like the father in Jesus’ story, then he is not above humiliating himself in order to go out after—and protect—his own. But the father does far more. The son had this little speech rehearsed, remember? And he starts to perform it for this special audience of one. But the father doesn’t let him even get it all out before he takes over and—reconciles. You see, the younger son was just asking for forgiveness. “Forgive me enough that I can live like the lowest status person in your household,” is what the boy was ready to say. “I’ve learned my lesson about what happens when I run my life without You.”

But what the father has in mind is ‘way beyond that. He puts shoes on his feet—which immediately separates him from the servants, who go around barefoot. Dad puts a family robe around the boy, showing to everyone his is one of the family again. And then Dad gives him a ring. This is a signet ring, the kind a head of a household would use to apply his authority to contracts. So Dad is giving this kid authority to speak for the household. This is far more than forgiveness, isn’t it? This is reconciliation—making right, like when we reconcile our home checkbook with the bank statement, which we generally consider likely to be more accurate and authoritative. That’s how God is—not afraid to humble Himself to reach out to us, bring us back, and reconcile us to a position of intimate relationship and authority.

Is that how you think of God?

But there’s much more in the story. Where do we see ourselves? Do any of us see ourselves as the returning prodigal, who finally ‘gets it’ at least in part, about the generous nature of His father, and swallows his pride enough to return home to seek the least from his father, whom he knows has every right to reject him, and even have him stoned. But of course, this young son has only begun to know his father as an adult; until now, he’s always viewed his father through the warped lens of his adolescence. He has much to learn, and much to grow into. Is that you, too, when it comes to God?

Or are you the older boy, the ‘responsible one’ who has always stuck it out? The older boy resents his father’s generosity. He has internalized “the rules”, but clearly has missed “the relationship” his father has always wanted with him. The boy is likewise still an adolescent, with a limited view of his father—and a sad small relationship with Dad. So the challenge in the story is not just, will he come to a party for his younger brother? The challenge for him is, will he open himself to a new understanding of his father and what counts—relationship, before rules?

And Jesus leaves that open, because he's told this story to an audience of grumbling rule-followers, and perhaps he himself is not sure what their response is going to be to him, who is living out the father role in hanging with "sinful" people.

How big is your grasp of God? And what difference does it make? Please! This is "life and death" here, in terms of your relationship with God. It's not about what you think or believe about God. It's how you know God, live with God, live for God. Is God more important to you than any other relationship, or do you try to fit Him in, as best you can, among all the other "things" and "people" in your life? If God is not the most important relationship in your life, you dishonor God and the price he has paid and pays now to reconcile you to Himself. What will be God's response to that, when you meet Him, face-to-face? All other relationships will end, you know. What are you doing with the only relationship that will last?

You see, many of us have grown up with a distorted idea of forgiveness. We think forgiveness is simply choosing not to resent someone for a hurt or debt or trespass they've made. That's only the beginning of the forgiveness the Bible shows us.

One of my regular heartaches happens when people bail out of APC without any chance of reconciliation or even forgiveness. They are saying, "These relationships are disposable, like flushable diapers. If they get dirty, we throw them away." These are the people who won't return phone calls. Of, if they will see me, I get a strong sense that they are hiding something from me, in an effort to appear "nice". Their hiding prevents me getting through the hurt, and is deaf to Christ's call to forgive and to reconcile with each other. God values relationship—he died to make it possible, in the face of our sin. He wants us to take on His values. We could make our church a laboratory for love, where we learn how to forgive and reconcile, which most of us have never learned how to do. It would stretch and expand our character, our capacity for relationships.

Why don't we engage in that? Because of our pride. We've been wronged, and perhaps all we've seen in our lives is people stuffing their hurt and anger in order to "make nice", or people walking away from conflict, or people taking revenge. "Making nice" seems an act of high generosity, compared to walking away, or taking revenge. But all three of those responses are powered by our pride. And in that sense, we have more pride than God.

If you understand—feel deeply in your heart—how much you've needed God's forgiveness for living your life by your own will and following all the rules without relationship, then you have a power to live like God lives, to love like God loves. It's more than "making nice" with someone. When the love of Christ controls us, we don't "make nice", we "make up"—we reconcile, and seek to rebuild and enrich relationships made more real by that hurt. The extent to which we do that reveals how much—or how little—we are followers of Jesus, with "Christ inside".

We may not feel we can do this. Our pride is picqued; our hurt is too deep.

What's missing? God. When we just can't forgive and reconcile, why don't we go to Jesus? Why don't we pour out our hearts to Jesus? Coming to God, our pride drops away—God knows all we've done to disappoint Him; how can we have any pride before Him? And who knows our hurt better than God? And who knows what it means to hurt, more than Jesus? So our hurt throbs less and less, as we "hang" with God. As we acknowledge our need for soothing

and help and healing, as we let the Holy Spirit minister to us, something happens. As the strength of God's love fills us again with HIS love, we will find we have power—God's power, for it's certainly not our own—to express God's kind of love. And so we begin the difficult work of 'making up', made possible by the One who loves us with an undying love, in spite of who we are, and how we've lived.

Be reconciled to God! And become an ambassador of reconciliation, making enemies into friends, transforming damaged relationships, making up after life's inevitable hurts. Imagine what church life could be—relationships far deeper, love far greater, vastly increased capacity for life as God designed it (with Him, and each other).

Step one—go to Jesus! Step two—make up with God. Step three—grow up a capacity to reconcile, powered by the love of Christ, living through you, for the benefit of others.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on March 18, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]