

**Coming to Our Senses**  
**Luke 15**  
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He woke up one morning and found himself in a pigsty. I doubt many, if any, of us have awakened in a literal pigsty. But plenty of us have our own version of hitting rock bottom, of awakening to find ourselves somewhere we did not intend to be, covered in slop, reeking like the barnyard. It is a powerful moment, a moment when we experience some clarity, sometimes for the first time in a long time; a moment when we look at ourselves in the mirror and wonder, how did I get here? How has my life come to this? How did I let this happen? What was I thinking?

There is a gift in the pigsties of our lives. They serve as a wake-up call, if we will allow ourselves to hear the alarm going off. They can serve as motivation, too, when, like the younger son in Jesus' parable, we realize that we don't want to stay where we are any longer; that we are finally ready to do whatever it takes to turn things around, to make amends, to move towards wholeness, to go home again. That's the moment when we finally begin to come to our senses.

In biblical, theological language we call this repentance. Repentance, like the idolatry we talked about a couple of weeks ago, is not a very popular subject these days. From the perspective of much of our culture, repentance is a sign of weakness. It is an experience of disempowerment; an aberration that hardly ever or never happens. The Christian gospel sees it quite differently. Martin Luther said repentance is a sign of strength, not weakness; that is in an experience of liberation rather than disempowerment; and that it should happen all the time. In his words, "All of life should be repentance."

So, what is "gospel repentance"? Notice that in Jesus' parable, the younger brother's repentance had both a vertical and horizontal dimension, and he understood correctly that the place he needed to start was with the vertical, with his relationship with God. Look at what he says in verse 18: "I will go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." That brings to mind the language of Psalm 51. In the aftermath of his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah, King David's confession begins, "Have mercy on me, O God. Against you, you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

Both David and the younger brother in Luke 15 recognize that the most egregious aspect of their behavior is that they have sinned against the grace and prodigious love of God. Both acknowledge that what's wrong with us is a form of self-centeredness, and repentance aims to restore a true understanding of self. Pain often initiates our awakening to the ways our brokenness hurts ourselves and others, but it's important to say that pain does not automatically do that. Pain can move us to self-pity and self-absorption. We can be really sad for ourselves and the pain we're in rather than being actually sorry for what caused the pain. It's the moral equivalent of being sorry we got caught rather than sorry for what we did.

The focus of gospel repentance is not on the fact that we broke the rules; it's sorrow over breaking God's heart. If our main concern is the consequences we'll face, that is just another version of being self-centered. Repentance will lead us to see our sin from God's perspective and the sorrow we feel will be on God's behalf.

The younger son also acknowledged that there was a horizontal dimension to his sin. Again, notice his language. "I have sinned against heaven and against you." There is no blaming. No excuses. No finger pointing. No disparaging remarks about how he was raised or how he felt inferior to or slighted by his older brother. Coming to our senses, or true repentance, is an awakening that leads us to take responsibility and refuses to indulge in self-pity or scapegoating.

So far, so good. To this point the younger brother "gets it." He experiences an awakening, he repents, and he is ready to go home, make amends and turn his life around. And here is where he gets repentance wrong, and he gets it wrong in the same way we do. He devises a seemingly brilliant plan to *earn* his way back into his father's good graces, but you know what? It doesn't work that way. The flip side of repentance is forgiveness, and forgiveness cannot be earned. Let's go back to the text: "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

Don't miss this: the father, *before he knows anything about the son's heart*, whether he is repentant or not, runs to meet him, falls on his neck which in the Greek more literally means he pounces on him, and kisses him. This scene tells us some important things about forgiveness: forgiveness takes the initiative, it's sacrificial, it is powered from within, and it leads to resurrection.

1. Takes the initiative: Before the younger son can reach his father, much less deliver his carefully prepared speech, his father comes racing towards him. The

father has obviously been waiting and watching for this lost son, and as soon as his son's shadow creeps across the horizon, the father is out the door, lifting up his skirts which a Middle Eastern patriarch would never have done, and is running towards his son. That is a profound picture of forgiveness. Forgiveness takes the initiative. It doesn't wait on the other. We've asked each week what this parable teaches us about God's grace and how our experience of that grace causes us to form a unique human community. This is Exhibit A. As Christians, it is always *our* move when it comes to forgiveness. In Matthew 5 Jesus says that if you're at the altar, and you remember that someone has something against you, you're to leave your offering and go and seek reconciliation with that person. In Matthew 18 Jesus says that if you have something against someone else, you're again to be the one to go and try to make it right between you. It doesn't matter if you're the offender or if you've been offended. It doesn't matter who started it or whose fault it is. We are the community of the faithful who *take the initiative* in the work of forgiveness and reconciliation. And that does make us unique. The way of the world is for people to sit on the porch, arms folded, waiting for the other person to act, waiting for them to approach and grovel. In the kingdom of God, we're racing off the porch, picking up our skirts and sprinting to initiate forgiveness and restore relationships.

2. Forgiveness is sacrificial. What did it cost to bring the younger brother back home? At first glance, it appears to cost nothing. Even though the younger son is willing to come back as a hired hand, willing to repay what he took from his father to make restitution, the father will have none of it. He refuses to let the son earn his way back into the family—which is a clear and accurate picture of how God's grace works—and it is also what makes God's grace such a scandal. The salvation of the younger son is indeed free—to *him*. But it is very costly to someone else. The father cannot forgive the younger son, except at the expense of the elder son. It is the older of the two boys who bears the cost of the father's act of reconciliation. Part of why we struggle so much with this parable is that we feel the unfairness of what forgiveness means to the elder brother. But what that reveals is how far we have to go to really understand the grace we've received as well as what grace asks of us.

Forgiveness absorbs rather than inflicts pain. It chooses to take the pain that rightfully belongs to someone else and to take it to oneself which means that forgiveness is always a source of suffering; it is always sacrificial. It also involves risk since it opens us to the possibility of further rejection, hurt and pain. This is exactly what Jesus was doing on the cross. He was absorbing the pain of our sin and taking it on himself. Jesus, too, ran towards us—running from heaven to earth

not with the possibility of pain and suffering but with the certainty that we would reject him and that our rejection would cost him his life.

3. Because forgiveness costs so much, it's not hard to see that it requires an inner power for us to willingly absorb another's pain. The father's reaction tells us something important about this inner dynamic. The text says the father was "filled with compassion." In the Greek the word that's used for "compassion" literally means to be moved from one's bowels—in other words, to be moved from the depths of one's being on behalf of someone else. But here's the real key: the father had been nurturing that compassion towards his son all during the son's long absence. He was already kissing his son in his heart; already embracing him; already forgiving him. Then, at the first opportunity, what was already in his heart is what came pouring out. If he had been nurturing resentment, hurt and anger, this story would have had a very different ending.

4. Forgiveness leads to resurrection—when we forgive, we release both ourselves and the other party from the past, and that requires us to do two things: to resist superiority and to release the other from liability. When it comes right down to it, grudges are based on feelings of being better than the other person. It's hard to stay mad at someone unless you feel, "I would never do that." As we discovered last week, the remedy for superiority is for us to all grasp our own lostness. We are no less lost than anyone else, including the person who has hurt us.

Forgiveness also requires us to release the offending party from the debt they owe us. Why is this so hard for us? If you've got 1 billion dollars in the bank, it's easy to forgive \$100 debt. But, if you've got no money in the bank, it is hard to forgive that same \$100. In Christ we are billionaires. When we remember that and remember our own lostness and what we have been forgiven, we will be willing to forgive others. The debt another person owes us is nothing compared to the debt we've already been forgiven by God.

What kind of community would we be if we understood repentance and forgiveness the way Jesus talks about it in the parable of the two lost sons?

1. Repentance and reconciliation will be a way of life, each of them happening all the time. The Church is a family of sinners, of elder brothers and younger brothers who are all lost and who are going to rub each other the wrong way from time to time. What sets us apart as a unique community is how we handle those situations. We will be outdoing one another to initiate forgiveness and reconciliation. We won't stand back with our arms folded across our chests waiting for someone else

to take the lead. We'll be running toward each other, and we'll have already forgiven our brother or sister before we go.

2. We will be a community of loving persuasion. We will not give up on each other. We will not hang on to resentment and bitterness. We will refuse to hold grudges. Attitudes of superiority will have no place in our communal life. One of the most disgraceful things about our national dialogue is the disparaging way people talk about those who disagree with them. I am ashamed to say that that also happens in the church at large, but it should not. It has no place here, and we lose our moral authority in the world when we allow anything but love, respect, and honoring the divine image in every person to be our guiding principles.

3. We set people free from their past. It is Christ's past, not our past that matters, and because of what Christ has already done, God receives us according to our great future in Christ, regardless of what is in our past. Vengeance creates a looping video in our hearts and minds. We replay the hurt and the misdeed over and over which means the pain cycles over and over as well. Forgiveness stops the video. It sets us free and it sets the one who hurt us free. It absorbs the pain so that it doesn't have to be passed on any more.

We can only become this type of community by looking to Jesus: Jesus on the cross, naked, without a robe; sipping vinegar rather than feasting on the fatted calf; wearing a crown of thorns rather than the family's signet ring. Jesus absorbed our pain so we could be welcomed by God. When we grasp the truth of who and whose we are and what we've been given, we will be a community of the lost transformed into grace-filled sons and daughters of the Father.

Thanks be to God. Amen.