

Sermon & Prayers for March 27, 2022
Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C
Bishop Bill Gafkjen, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA

Prayer of the Day

God of compassion, you welcome the wayward, and you embrace us all with your mercy. By our baptism clothe us with garments of your grace, and feed us at the table of your love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:13, 11b-32

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³So he told them this parable: ^{11b}“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A 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. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But 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! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But 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. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for 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 when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and

sound.’²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.
²⁹But 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.³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.³²But 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.’”

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in abundance, beloved children of God, from God our Creator, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“There was a man who had two sons.”

This story that Jesus tells is not the first biblical story about a man who had two sons.

Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel. The older, Cain, killed the younger, Abel.

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. The older son, Ishmael, was exiled from Abraham’s camp while the younger, Isaac, inherited Abraham’s covenant.

Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. The younger, Jacob, bartered for his elder brother’s birthright and tricked his father into giving him the blessing. Meanwhile, the older, Esau, disappeared from the narrative.

There are more biblical stories about two brothers, but these should suffice to point out a pattern among them:

These are almost always troubled relationships and one of the siblings almost always comes out way ahead of the other, most often through less than commendable means.

Sadly, too many of us are experiencing or seeing similar dynamics playing out in our life together as the body of Christ and in our civic community. We are far too often set against one another, or set ourselves against each other, in ways that favor one and diminish, exclude, or hurt the other.

Take a moment to reflect on where and how you have seen this sort of dynamic playing out in your relationships with family, friends, or members of your local community of faith. Where and how have you seen this dynamic of favoring one and bashing or banishing the other in our life together as church or local, national, or global community? *[pause for reflection]*

Note that the story Jesus tells today has a bit of a twist from the other stories of sibling relationships. Yes, there is trouble and tension in the relationship between the two sons. But, despite the elder brother’s initial complaint, neither one comes out ahead of the other. In the end, the father hugs and holds them both in love...and reframes their relationship with each other.

This parent runs down the driveway to hug home the wayward one and goes looking for the one sulking in the shadows to remind them both that neither has ever ceased to be his beloved child. Neither have they ceased to be each other's brother.

To the younger son who, on his return from wayward wandering said "I am no longer worthy to be called your son" the father said: *This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*

To the elder son who, in his anger about the celebration separated himself from the other son by referring to him as "this son of yours" the father said: *Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. We had to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life.*

Neither has ceased to be a beloved child of the father. Neither have they ceased to be each other's brother.

The apostle Paul reminds us that this is what God has done for us and for all our siblings, including those we have bested or shunned or deemed lost.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In Christ, whether we wander and squander or hang out huffy in the shadows, God runs down the driveway, goes looking for us in the shadows, to hug us home with forgiving, forbearing love, and to usher us in to the feast of those who are found when lost and raised to new life when dead.

Whether we have wandered and squandered our inheritance or have grown distant in the daily grind, we do not cease to be God's children; we do not cease to be siblings of one another. That hug home and that invitation to the feast are etched on our baptized brows and sealed in our wandering, resentful hearts...FOREVER.

Do you hear the echo moving through the centuries to meet you here today?

Dear child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

Dear child, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Dear child, in Christ God reconciled the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, and has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us.

Hugged home and gathered together in the resurrection feast, we are sent back to where we came from as ambassadors for Christ, God making God's appeal through us to a wandering and resentful world, to be reconciled to God and to one another.

Amy-Jill Levine suggests that this ambassador work can begin slowly, in small steps that move toward forgiveness and reconciliation. She suggests that this story that begins with the simple sentence "There was a man who had two sons"...

"...provokes us with simple exhortations. Recognize that the one you have lost may be right in your own household. Do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate with others, both so that you can share the joy and so that the others will help prevent the recovered from ever being lost again. Don't wait until you receive an apology; you may never get one. Don't wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it. Don't stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past. Instead, go have lunch. Go celebrate, and invite others to join you. If the repenting and the forgiving come later, so much the better. And if not, you still will have done what is necessary. You will have begun a process that might lead to reconciliation. You will have opened a second chance for wholeness."ⁱ

As it turns out, God is always opening up second chances for wholeness!.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercessionⁱⁱ

Drawn close to the heart of God, we offer these prayers for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

Jesus formed the disciples in the ways of extravagant mercy and profound welcome. Lead your church to be a community marked by forgiveness, hospitality, and celebration. Send us to transform a world plagued by fear and condemnation. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

You make the land to produce a harvest that sustains your entire creation. Equip farmers and farm workers who till the soil. Nourish the earth with ample rainfall and abundant sunshine. Heal grounds tainted by pollution or misuse. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Countries are divided and leaders often harbor grudges. Reconcile nations that experience conflict, including Ukraine. Act quickly to bring an end to war. Anoint peacemakers trained in the art of diplomacy and foster a spirit of collaboration among political rivals. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Your people cry for help in times of distress. Resolve disagreements among family members. Save those experiencing financial hardship. Hear our prayers for those who are sick or grieving (*especially those we name now...*). Console us with the promise that everything can become new. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Your love comes to us when a table is set and a feast is prepared. Bless the feeding ministries of congregations and communities across Kentucky and Indiana and beyond. Bring an end to hunger in our communities and around the world. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

The one who was dead is alive again. We give thanks for those who have died, confident that steadfast love surrounds them. Shelter them in your love until we are gathered at your heavenly banquet. Merciful God, **receive our prayer.**

Accept the prayers we bring, O God, on behalf of a world in need, for the sake of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, **Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Jew**, Harper Collins © 2014 Amy-Jill Levine, p. 74.

ⁱⁱ Prayers, including the Prayer of the Day, adapted from SundaysandSeasons.com.