

“Seeing as *In Christ*”
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31 March 2019

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I want to begin by looking at our first reading from St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians and apply what we learn there to reading with fresh eyes the well-known parable about Prodigality. With fresh eyes, let’s look at the prodigal who squanders, the prodigal who wastes, the prodigal who loves with extravagance. We are all familiar with the word “therefore.” It usually serves as an adverb that expresses a relationship of place, time or circumstance. We say “therefore” so we don’t have to say “for that reason,” or “consequently so,” or “hence,” or “whence,” or “thus,” or “ergo,” or “accordingly.” Mostly we stick with the simple “therefore,” but simple or not, “therefore” requires an antecedent. With April 15 approaching, we would never simply say “Therefore, I will not be filing my income tax papers on time this year,” without first stating the reason why you will miss the deadline. Maybe you are waiting for one more 1099, or you simply like to be a week or so late, just to see what happens. But regardless, to say “therefore” requires us to state the reason up front.

Our first reading begins with “therefore,” and because it does, we must look for the antecedent, the reason that comes before our reading. Justo González wrote a piece on this a few years back to draw attention to the reason Paul says “therefore” in today’s reading. In a few verses before ours, Paul reveals that apparently he has been accused of making sense sometimes and, on other occasions, acting or speaking as a crazy fanatic. “If we are beside ourselves, it is for God,” Paul writes. “If we are in our right mind, it is for you” (5:13). Paul then explains his behavior on the grounds that the love of Christ constrains him, because the death of Christ means that we all have died. Now, this long predates the current fascination with zombies, which I still don’t quite understand. And the Corinthians didn’t quite understand Paul’s fascination with Christ’s death and how Christ’s dead meant that they, too, had died. But Paul sees everybody—including Christ himself—in a different way. And not just his friends in Corinth, and, by extension you and me; Paul sees an entire new creation. Through the Christ window, Paul sees the cosmic dimensions of everything. González says pointedly, “Paul does not say that God was in Christ reconciling *believers* with God, but rather that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself. Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.’”

Really? Well, Paul acknowledges that you have to view all things through the Christ window to see what he sees, and not everybody will look (for themselves) through the Christ window. And those who won’t or can’t, in other words those who do not abide “in Christ?” Well, they may see those of us who do as those who are “beside themselves.” But, is this not our calling – to be “beside ourselves,” as a result of what we see and have discovered? Paul certainly thinks so. And are we not called to be “in our right minds” as we work within the old creation but in service of the new and its values? These are questions worth asking.

And now, let’s look with new eyes at an old parable. I’m reminded of the Sunday School teacher who was reading today’s parable about “prodigality” to his students, who had always held a little resentment toward the younger brother and felt sympathy for the older brother who had to welcome back the little brat. When it came time for questions, the teacher began: “Now who was really sad that the prodigal son had come home?” After a few seconds of silence, one little boy raised his hand and replied, “The fatted calf?”

With a new creation in our sight, let's ask this question of today's parable: Who benefits from the younger brother's homecoming? Our first response is likely, "Well not the older brother. He doesn't see the least bit happy." And to the degree that we are cynical about the chronically self-centered and wayward, welcoming the younger one back into the family business after a short and syrupy confession surely doesn't help those looking on who wonder, "Well, if it's that easy to return, maybe a little time in Las Vegas isn't all that bad." You may have a sibling who has worked and worked and abused the family system for years. And, let's admit it, the parable doesn't explicitly say that the younger brother stays clean and sober and productive on the family farm. But – uncross your arms for a minute – if we can see the new creation at work, we at least have to admit that the father benefits from the younger son's return.

And we must ask the same question concerning the older son. Who benefits had the older son joined the party? The younger brother? I doubt it. Have you ever had to live with a merciless pout, you know, the person who is so easily offended and who suffers from the low-grade fever of chronic suspicion? Ever hang out with someone suffering from the autoimmune disorder of the chronic disapproval of others? I know, the parable doesn't explicitly say that the older brother actually makes it to the party. But, if I uncross our arms for just a minute, when I glimpse the new creation at work, I'm almost sure the old pout finally attends. In the end, not in our lifetime, maybe, but in the end, we cannot resist Love's entreaty to attend God's love feast.

You may have a sibling who finally, after years, lightens up enough that you actually enjoy being with him or her. At least occasionally? We must be patient; God's new creation will not be rushed.

Look. If we can see a new creation at work, we discover that it is the father who benefits from both sons being at the party, and had Jesus told the parable featuring a mother and two daughters, it would be the same. Lloyd Ogilvie writes (in his *Autobiography of God*), "The spotlight is never off the father; he dominates every scene even when he's off stage. The two sons are but supporting characters, vivid contrasts to the father.... Who is the father? Jesus hoped we'd ask. The father is God, and God is the Prodigal; his love knows no limits, his forgiveness no boundaries, his joy no restraint."

Herein lies our take home assignment for this our fourth week in Lent. The Spirit invites us to look into our own prodigality, not for shame, not for blame, but for learning, healing, and hope. There a prodigality of wasteful spending, and there is a prodigality of wasteful hoarding. Either way, it is "the estranged heart that is the far country," said St. Augustine, "and the distance is not measured by our feet but by our affection." But keep looking, please. We look deeply into our own prodigality in the hope that we will see the lavish love and acceptance that is ours not only to receive but to give.

On a cold, dreary December evening, several hundred people gathered at a large downtown Methodist church in Winston-Salem to celebrate the Christmas season. Bishop Ernest Fitzgerald, a distinguished United Methodist preacher often featured on the old Protestant Hour broadcast, who died in the 1990s, I think, happened to be present that evening, and came across a small boy, not more than three years old, who was pushing against the large oak doors of the church, trying to get outside. Fitzgerald supposedly picked him up, thinking he belonged to someone at one of the Christmas parties, but as he opened the doors and looked outside he spotted an old-model car speeding away in the darkness. Gradually, it dawned on him that the

child he held in his arms had been abandoned. Phone calls were made, people, little by little, came to the church wanting to help in any way they could. Within an hour, the local TV stations interrupted their usual programs to ask if anyone knew the identity of the little boy. The next morning, one of the city's newspapers put the child's picture on the front page, along with an article describing the events of the evening before. The article began with this striking line: "Someone trusted the church last night, and the church came through!"

May that we said of us: trusted – you, me, us, here! – and found faithful – you me, us, here!
How? In Christ, everything old has passed away; behold, everything has become new. Amen.