

3/31/2019

“Coming Together”

Scripture: Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32; 2 Corinthians 5:15-21

Series: With All Your Heart

Theme: In Christ we are made a new creation, as our lives are woven together by the Holy Spirit with God and others.

Opening Activity: Woven together by God

Questions:

1. Do you feel loved by God or another person?
2. Are you presently estranged from a family member, a friend or God?
3. When you look back on something you said or did, do you wish it could have been handled differently?
4. Have you ever found it hard to forgive yourself or someone else?
5. Have you been reconciled, or come back together, with God or another person?

† **Though we were “dead”, yet we are made alive again. Though we were “lost”, now we are found.**

Over the past several weeks, we have embarked on a “journey of the heart,” walking these Lenten days toward resurrection. Starting with God’s generous heart, we have been embracing transformation, new possibilities, and new life as we return to God with all our hearts. But we still have work to do before we arrive in the garden with an empty tomb.

As Easter begins to appear on the horizon and realizing that every Sunday is really a celebration of the Lord’s resurrection, we might be tempted to jump to the end without remembering the steps we must still take. But if we listen to the words of Jesus and later the Apostle Paul, we realize that our return to God involves imitating Christ’s humility and way, repenting and turning around, and reuniting or coming together with God.

To use a metaphor shared by Revs. Todd and Jennifer Pick, “Before we can get to the new creation of Easter, we have some repair work to do within our own hearts and in our world. So far on our journey, we have travelled through fruitful fields, barren wilderness, countless stars, promises of God both large and small, and tables where all are fed. Like threads that sew together a patchwork quilt, this week we begin binding together our

journey with repentance, reconciliation, and repair.” (UM Discipleship Ministries, 3/31/19)

As we see from the Parable of the Prodigal Son, sometimes called the Parable of the Loving Father, we are given a perspective beyond that of both the loyal son and prodigal son. It is a perspective of the loving father, who graciously gives the younger son his inheritance while the father himself is still living. And although the son had squandered it on wild living, the father was only too glad to see his son return. As we just heard, and as I described last week - while the son was still a long way off, the father saw him and ran to him. Filled with compassion, he threw his arms around him, hugged and kissed him.

And when the son confessed to his father, the father had nothing but love and joy in his heart. He had him clothed with the finest robe, a ring put on his finger, sandals for his feet, and ordered a feast of celebration! As he said, *“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”* (Luke 15:24)

Friends, you too may have had an experience similar to the younger son. You may have taken your blessings from God and squandered them in one way or another. Yet you too came to your senses, returned to God with all your heart, and experienced God’s great love and joy for you!

For though we were “dead”, yet we are made alive again. Though we were “lost”, now we are found. What a wonderful feeling that is!

And yet, maybe some of us are more like the older brother. Though he was loyal to the father all his life, he never realized the father’s love, appreciation, and blessings available to him. He never knew his fullest desires for him. Do not moan and groan about God’s love for your younger brother, Jesus would say. Realize and be glad that your sibling who was dead is now alive again! Though he or she was lost, is now found!

This is what it means to be reconciled with God. We come together with God. This is what happens when we are moved by the Holy Spirit, when we are in Christ. This, the gospels tell us, is made possible by the baptism, sacrificial life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

† **As reconciled children of God, we see the world from a different perspective, and join in the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors of Christ.**

When this happens, the apostle Paul reminds us, we are made new. Our lives are changed – transformed! Our thoughts, our feelings, our perspectives are remade in Christ. This may be instantaneously. Or, it may more likely be the beginning of an ongoing process. But something different, something new has come.

As Paul writes to the early believers in Corinth (2 Corinthians 5:16-21 NRSV):

“From 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.

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

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

In Christ, we see and love as our Heavenly Father does, described in Jesus’ parable.

Jesus sent the apostles to share the good news of God’s love and forgiveness, with hopes of seeking and finding those who were lost and restoring those who were spiritually dead. As Paul says (vs. 20-21) . . .

“So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Friends, Christ took our sins and our sinful nature upon himself, so that we could live in right relationship with God and others. So that we could live by the Holy Spirit, bearing its fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

God’s love and forgiveness is not just for some, but for all who would receive it. All can be made new. And Christ’s ministry of reconciliation is not limited to one person or group, but for all who would be ambassadors for Christ.

As Todd and Jennifer Pick put it:

“Jesus saw through all barriers and boundaries, broke them to the point where even death lost all its finality. Jesus saw through all brokenness and hopelessness, poured himself out to the point where love conquered all. What if part of our Lenten discipline involved learning to see with grace-healed eyes? What if we learned how to see with a newer, broader vision so that the widening of our vision led to a widening of our hearts? What if we focused on the threads of creation that bind us together and through the work

of reconciliation began to stitch the threads of a new creation -- threads that would bind us closer to one another and to God?" (ibid.)

In my study and meditations on the scripture this week, I was reminded of the healing work done by Christians who helped Jews during the Holocaust, the intentional involvement of myself and others within the United Methodist Church, the Christian Church universal and people of other faiths. I think of those who have come together across faith and other lines in times of mass shootings, those who seek to bring healing and wholeness to families torn by addiction of one kind or another, and the mission and ministry of UMCOR bringing many people together to rebuild lives and communities.

Our opening exercise demonstrated some of the thoughts, feelings and experiences we may have in common with others here today, as well as elsewhere I am sure. So let me close by asking a few more questions for self-discovery and journey . . .

How would you describe your relationship with God? With others you know well? With others you do not know well?

Have you experienced the peace and joy of being reconciled, coming together, or made one with God in Christ?

How do you feel called to share in Christ's ministry of reconciliation?

Let us pray . . . Heavenly Father, you sent Jesus into this world to call us back to you and make the way for us. He said that he desired to gather us together as a mother hen desires together her chicks. By your Spirit, O Lord, may we hear your voice, return to you with all our hearts. May we be made new, letting go of the past, and follow in his way. May we see ourselves, others, and our world from your perspective. And use us as Christ's ambassadors, bringing peace, hope and healing to our world.