

Reconciled with God

[Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

The story of the prodigal son is one of the best known and most beloved stories that Jesus told. Anyone over thirty has a misspent youth – a time of experiment and passion which leaves us, in hindsight, at least a little embarrassed if not appalled and guilty. So we relate to the young man who demands his inheritance, goes off to seek his fortune and ends up blowing through his entire trust fund with nothing to show for it except mangled relationships and an overdrawn bank account.

And we have all had our moments when it seemed that we had messed up so badly that we might as well be sitting in a pigsty eating pigswill.

This story of return and reconciliation warms our hearts and it gives us hope; hope that however bad it gets there is still a home to go to, a home in God who we can count on to welcome us like that amazing father who not only forgave, but setting aside his dignity, ran to meet his returning son.

But this morning I want to expand this narrative a bit, taking it away from the very personal relationship with God and into the bigger, cosmic picture. In doing so, I am following the protestant theologian, Karl Barth. Some of you know that I do not agree with some of Barth's theology but it is good to pay attention to diverse voices in the interpretative community.

To start with, look at the introduction Luke gives us, "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." In response, Jesus tells three parables – the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost son. This is not just a story of personal reconciliation but a story of how God reaches out to us, which explains why Jesus was more than happy when the tax-collectors and sinners showed up to listen to him.

Now let us think for a moment of the young man's journey to the "distant country". This has similarities to the family of Israel going to the distant country of Egypt and finding that what was initially a life-saving journey out of famine into plenty became a life of slavery and oppression. It is also similar to the journey that the Christ makes to the "distant country" of humanity as God becomes incarnate as a human.

So the son in the story may be more than the individual soul. The son may be the whole Jewish people. He may also be Jesus the Christ. We need not choose. Every really good story has multiple levels of meaning, and this is a really good story.

By the time the son comes home from the far country, everyone is changed. We are all changing all the time, and the son has changed dramatically as a result of his adventures – possibly less so the father and the elder son, though having one family member leave always requires a significant shift in family dynamics. There are many books and movies based on the return of one who left years before, and the changed relationships they find on their return.

The returning son has changed as a result of his adventures – he is less sure of himself and has developed a new humility. The family of Israel grew into a nation in the far country and returned to the Holy Land as a people not just an extended family. And Jesus is changed. Jesus spends time with tax-collectors and sinners, Jesus becomes a different person because of his time with his friends and his enemies. And if we truly believe that Jesus is both totally human and totally God then we have to believe that God in Christ is also changed.

When Jesus the Christ returns to his father, God, he brings with him not just his Christ-ness but also his humanity. When Jesus the Christ is “reunited” with the rest of the Godhead he is reunited as human as well as God so in his very self he brings us with him into one-ness with God.

Thus this becomes a story of a God who set out with immeasurable wealth, but as Paul tells us in Philippians, “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being found in human likeness.” In his journey to the far country of humanness he let go of his wealth and power becoming fully and entirely human so that when he returns to the Godhead he is returning not just as God but also as human and taking us with him. And thus we are totally and completely reconciled with God.

Isn’t that amazing!

Our task is to make that cosmic reality a personal one. For ourselves as individuals and for our community, both local and global.

This morning’s New York Times suggests that the Ukraine war may be the end of an unprecedented period of peace in the world – peace in the sense of relatively few wars and few lives lost. Or, it says, it may be the final battle of the Cold War. Perhaps I am a romantic but I truly believe that world peace is possible, but it is going to take each one of us to commit to peace and reconciliation and to sending the light and love of the Christ to places where there is no peace or where peace is fragile.

The big disagreement between theologian Karl Barth and I – and I hasten to add, many others – is his sense of the distance between God and humanity. In his interpretation of this story he sees the Son of God making a journey to the “distant country” of humanity. Just as God sent Moses – you remember the story of the burning bush we heard last week? – God sent Moses “way down in Egypt land” to liberate his people.

My friends, I don’t think that God is distant from us. Yes, there is a necessary distinction between God and God’s creation. We are not God, though in the reign of God we are reconciled with God and I believe humanity is raised into the Godhead through the work of Christ. But you and I are not God and it is important for us to remember that. “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” as we reminded each other on Ash Wednesday.

But God is surely here with us, permeating every part of creation, bringing life into the cosmos. We can make many things but we cannot animate them – we cannot make them living breathing things. There is an apocryphal story of Jesus as a child making birds out of clay. And then he breathed on them and they flew away. Only God can breathe life into dust, into carbon.

If God is here, permeating every part of Creation, the life force that animates all beings, then our prayer makes a difference. Our attitudes make a difference. The love and light we send to our sisters and brothers in Ukraine gets there. Because God is changed by us. It is as though God is a painter but the pigment God uses also has freewill and can move and change the picture. So our use of our freewill becomes part of the picture. Our choice to live in reconciliation with God, our choice for peace and goodwill among all humanity, our choice to pray, makes a difference to God and changes the bigger picture.

People of God, we are reconciled to God. Jesus the Christ has done it – the sacrifice made once and for all – but we get to make it ours. And one way we do that is in partaking in the body of Christ in the eucharist. It makes us into Christ's self. We come to the feast willingly, knowing that despite our misspent youth, despite the mistakes and even disasters of the past week, we are beloved daughters and sons of the living God, and in the sacrament of communion we are made one with God. But this is not for us alone. It is for the whole world.

We partake in Christ and it becomes our responsibility as well as our privilege to share God's reconciliation with the entire cosmos. Knowing that Christ has already done it, our task is to pray and live and breathe, peace.

People of God, let us not shirk the mission that God has given us.