

Lent IV Year C: 30 / 31 March 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“We have only to acknowledge our dependence upon God and strive to be less judgmental and conditional in our relationships with one another, for we are all sinners in need of forgiveness.”

Joshua 5: 9-12
2 Corinthians 5: 16-21
Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32
Psalm 32

In the monastic world, monks and ascetics sometimes experience what is understood as *acedia* – a state of disinterest with one’s life or being, a lethargy, a disconnect with the world around you. It is not depression. Rather, it is a severe disinterest in activity and one’s personal wellbeing. For the religious, it often occurs around one’s spiritual life, one’s faith, and one’s religious practice. This condition, though, is not limited to monastics. It can plague anyone at any time. I recently had a conversation with a colleague at the latest Learning Community Initiative training who was working his way out of what was a painful experience with *acedia* and the listlessness that accompanied it. Some who experience *acedia* show no interest in life and remain slothful while others feel an emptiness inside, a vacancy that haunts their psyche. Ironically, though they lack the wherewithal from *acedia*, those who experience emptiness will seek to fill the void with distractions. Some will fill their time with work in order to be seen as vital and needed and indispensable to the organization. Others try and fill this emptiness with activity, whether physical or intellectual. Others, however, succumb to addictions of various kinds. Truth is, all of us have an emptiness inside, such that our consumerist culture is constantly working to provide the remedy; to convince us that if you have a perfect white smile, the slender tone/tanned physique, wore the newest fashion labels, etcetera, etcetera, you will be happy and satisfied. We should not look too harshly on the younger sibling in this overly familiar parable of the prodigal son, as he may well epitomize our own lives.

He may well have been acting presumptuously in asking for his inheritance before his father's death. However, what child has not wanted to escape the rigors of parental control and oversight? Have we not all chafed at the limits placed upon us by those in authority? Do we not sometimes try to bend the rules or find some wiggle-room in challenging situations? We may not have asked for a financial buyout, but, if we are honest with ourselves, we too have tried to wrangle our way around expectations. It's what we do when the emptiness inside leads us into responding to the sirens call of a better life outside the confines of our own lives.

Amazingly, the son is granted his wish, and off to Vegas he goes with the unearned spoils to live the life he has dreamt of. And live life he does. It may be a consumer society with all its alluring pleasures, but it's a false promise of fulfillment. That is what eventually consumes us, as it did this younger son. Broken and destitute, he finds himself alone and in want of food and shelter, surrendering himself in laboring for others in a vain attempt to change his situation. As anyone who has experienced acedia knows, eventually you hit bottom and realize you need to work your way out of the pit that has swallowed you up – a pit often of your own making. Hence, the son realizes he must return to his father, beg forgiveness, and hopefully be received back as a slave, forfeiting his claim as his father's son.

Things didn't unfold as he expected. His father's compassion is so great, that he rushes to greet his gluttonous son. This wayward child, experiences *unconditional forgiveness* such that he is not only welcomed home, but returned to his favored status. And his older brother is miffed. Would we not be also? After all, the elder child has seemingly done everything correctly: obeying his father's wishes by following all the rules. He did the work, asking for nothing in return only to see his scoundrel of a brother having the audacity to show up at the front door and be treated as royalty. It's so unfair.

Isn't it frustrating to see God celebrate the return of the one who flaunted it all in selfish abandonment? Doesn't that grate on you a little bit? But who, actually, is the selfish one in the story? Too often, in religious life and in the church, folks work devilishly hard to get all the right boxes checked, do and say all the right things, suffer from volunteerism and the workload associated with it. Too many Christians seek only to follow the rules, do what's expected, strive for approval and the honor it bestows all in a vain effort to gain the "golden ticket" from which

one is granted safe passage into heaven. All the while, God's unconditional love imparts the grace of forgiveness to all those who return after living a wayward life. No boxes being checked here. Only genuine beneficence. If that's the case, why bother doing any of that religious "do good" stuff if God is going to shower the repentant with the same beneficence that others have labored in faith to achieve?

Because it is not about gaining a reward for good behavior. It is about being shaped and formed into the image of Christ. It is about Jesus breaking bread with sinners, with those who do not have all the correct boxes checked, haven't followed all the rules and done all the right things. It is about being worthy of God's mercy and forgiveness regardless of our faults and situation. Jesus welcomes the sinner without judgment or condemnation. He is present to them and with them knowing that they have traveled far from God and offers them an opportunity to reconsider their life in the light of God's unconditional love. It's about reconciliation.

Reconciliation is no easy task. To admit one was wrong and wayward is indeed very humbling. It's the impetus to reach for our better selves, to be our better selves in the eye of God. Many of us have heard of 12 step programs for those in recovery from addictions. The eighth step personifies the challenge of reconciliation in asking that one list all those whom have been harmed or wounded by said individual and to seek to make amends. This exercise lays bare a person's faults and makes one vulnerable to those who have been impacted by behavior that has caused strife in their lives. Joan Chittister, spiritual writer and Benedictine nun, has written a twelve-step spiritual exercise that acts as a guide for those who have not been as attentive to their relationship with Christ as demonstrated by **both** siblings in this parable. Her twelve steps are these:

Recognize the presence of God

Accept the will of God

Accept spiritual direction

Persevere

Acknowledge your faults

Live simply

Be honest about [and with] yourself

Be willing to learn from others

Listen to people

Speak kindly to [and of] others

Accept others the way they are

Be centered and serene

I find this to be a wonderful template for the act of reconciling with one another and with God. That is the appeal God, in this parable, is making to each of us, whether we see ourselves as the wayward sibling or the obedient sibling. Each of us has an emptiness within that only God's grace can fill. A grace predicated upon unconditional love. We have only to acknowledge our dependence upon God and strive to be less judgmental and conditional in our relationships with one another, for we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. May the Spirit guide us in our spiritual journey of reconciliation.