

We often believe we are the problem

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Bless this mess?

We are going through the season of Lent and the main theme for this year is “good enough.” How do you like it so far? I have heard that many of you say “good enough.” I really like this theme because it brings us down to real life and affirms us as we are. Nobody is perfect but still we are good enough! Of course, as a pastor, I also have a concern about this ‘good enough’ theme because the phrase “good enough” can be misused to let you off the hook in striving for excellence. In fact, many people actually do that. [ppt] Have you seen this sign, “Bless this mess?” Maybe something a teenage son would say to his mother when he is being told to clean his room. Right? We may find this sign in many places such as kitchens, basements or other disordered spaces. Rev. Tom said that “sin creates a lot of chaos and confusion in our lives.” But instead of seeking transformation and surrendering to God’s design for life, we ask God to “bless this mess”. Using the phrase may mean that we want God to ignore our mess or magically fix it.” (Restored, 58) In the same sense, the phrase ‘good enough’ can be used to cover our mess or sin. While we accept and enjoy God’s affirming word of “you are good enough,” we also need to honestly face our messes.

Lent is known as the season of repentance, facing and confessing our sin before God. Because Lent calls Christians to confess and repent from sin, we often get stuck in shame and guilt. But the purpose of Lent is not to make us beat ourselves up and feel “I am bad.” Rather, it seeks for reconciliation with God. Lent enables us to reflect on our lives and relationships with God, ourselves and others and to look at the direction of our lives, so that we can turn around if we are heading in a wrong direction.

The Prodigal Son

In today’s parable, we see a young man heading in a wrong direction. He made a series of poor decisions and mistakes that devastated his life and relationships with his family. First, he requested his father give him his inheritance in advance, though his father was still in good health. In other words, this prodigal son treated his father as if he were already dead. Also, his poor choice severed his relationship with his older brother. Land was family property and brothers were to live together on the land after a father’s death, but the prodigal son sold his share of the land and left town. This younger son’s actions would have brought shame and pain to his father, but this younger son had his own perfect dream life and with this dream, he headed toward a distant country.

“There, this undisciplined young man wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to feel it. Eventually, he ended up in the pig slop. His dream life was completely shattered. He hit bottom.

Since the Bible doesn’t tell us how he felt, we can imagine how he would feel about himself when he found himself in the middle of the pig slop? He hadn’t gone to this distant country to fail. He must have a dreamt of making a financial fortune and being rich and successful in this foreign land. He might have thought, “I was a little harsh to my family. But one day, I will go back to my father’s house with all my fortune and I will make it up and repay him and my brother. I can make them be proud of me!” But he failed. He failed miserably. How would he feel? He might have felt shame, guilt, and fear at being seen as a failure, just like the negative emotions that leave us wallowing in the mud when we fail. Our delusions of a

perfectible life keep us disappointed in ourselves because none of us will ever be perfect. I hope that no one in this church is ever in this prodigal son's situation. But if you are in a similar circumstance, don't beat yourself up with shame and guilt, but pray.

[ppt] There is "the other serenity prayer." God, Grant me the serenity to stop beating myself up for not doing things perfectly, the courage to forgive myself because I'm working on doing better, and the wisdom to know that you already love me just the way I am." (unknown)

We all have made mistakes. We all make poor decisions and sometimes, really bad choices at some points of our lives. When we fail or make mistakes, we don't have to see ourselves as problems. In the same sense, we don't have to see others, including troublemakers as problems. According to the scripture reading, Jesus told this parable when he heard the Pharisees and the scribes grumbling and saying, "this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." They didn't see the tax collectors and sinners as being in the image of God, but they saw them as the problem. As easily as we blame ourselves, we can easily blame others. But Jesus' parable reminds us that, no matter who they are or what they have done, God's grace and love is always available for them and to us.

When I read this parable, I initially perceived the younger son as the problem. He was the villain of the story. However, his series of poor decisions and mistakes did not make him the problem because he could still be changed and get better. It is the same for us. We all make mistakes. It is an inevitable part of being human. We fail because we are imperfect human beings. It has been said, "To make mistakes is human; to stumble is commonplace; to be able to laugh at yourself is maturity." There is always the possibility for change in our lives. We can get better by learning from our mistakes. We can be better people by learning from our failures. Don't be your harshest critic, especially when things do not go as you plan. Don't see yourselves as the problem. Rather, remember that God's unconditional grace is still and always available to you..

Becoming Real

Dr. McFee said, "Getting better necessarily means we WILL make mistakes until we learn. None of us will even come close to perfect right away at anything. But if we live in an environment where we know we will be loved anyway, we are more free to live fully and more hospitably ourselves." It's o.k. to make mistakes because no matter what, God loves you and God's grace is still available for you..

This is what we learn from the parable. This undisciplined son's extravagant failure is met with extravagant love and grace of the father. I don't know if this son really repented his sin or not, but at least he knew that his father's table was abundant enough for all; his father will not kick him out. He felt that he didn't deserve to be called his son. So he said, 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.' He saw himself as the problem. "But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then bring the prize-winning heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to celebrate.

God loves the best in us, but God still loves us even when we are at our worst. This unconditional love is the very condition under which we can live fully and strive for a better life. We will never be perfect. We will continue to make mistakes. Sometimes, we feel that we get worse rather than better, but in all those moments, God still loves us and we still love God,

maybe, imperfectly, but we still love God! We can still be changed by that love. Dr. Kate wrote, “We become real through our wear and tear... By being loved imperfectly and loving imperfectly. In both, we are changed. And keep changing.” My friends, God never sees us as the problem. With faith in God’s perfect love for us, let us honestly face our messes and begin our cleansing work during this Lenten season. The Holy Spirit will guide our journey of change! Amen.