

“Hope”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 9, 2019

Pentecost Sunday

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 15:11-24

Each of us have the common experience of being children. Though we might have aged out of that demographic years ago, we all have parents – whether birth, adoptive or other adults who fill that role for us. Each of us is a son or a daughter.

As Christians, we also claim this in a spiritual sense. There is language throughout the bible that describes us as being children of God – sons and daughters of a divine Parent; beloved in a way that can only be described as the relationship between mother or father and child.

And yet, we also know that far too many relationships – including those between parent and child – are strained or even broken. Maybe this is why Jesus’ telling of the Parable of the Prodigal Son is so powerful. For, in it, most of us can see ourselves in one of these two brothers – the younger son who leaves and returns, or the older son, the one we meet later in the story, who is resentful after having stayed home – or maybe at times we see ourselves in both. Many of us also can picture – to varying degrees – either ourselves or our God as the father, the loving parent, the one who willingly forgives and generously welcomes the one who has been lost back home.

This is the second week in our summer-long sermon series looking at the spirituality of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Last week, we examined the first step: *We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.* The spiritual aspect that we discussed was honesty: coming to the truth about how addictions of whatever kind can take over our lives and become their primary focus; how we are powerless on our own to change these behaviors and the thoughts and feelings behind them.

This week, we are considering the Second Step of AA: *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.* As Terence Gorski describes it: if Step One teaches addicts to understand “I can’t,” then the lesson of the Step Two is “Someone else can.”¹

An addictive insanity expects different outcomes from the same behaviors and thus is manifested through an obsession and compulsion to use. When we meet the

¹ Terrence Gorski, *Understanding the Twelve Steps*, p. 57

younger brother, the son who becomes the prodigal, he immediately comes across as a user. Before it is due to him, he asks his father for his portion of the inheritance and then, when it is granted, leaves home – taking it with him. Our translation tells us that he “squandered his property in dissolute living,” but we can imagine by what types of behaviors he would have poured his fortune down the drain.

In Twelve Step programs, participants are encouraged to tell their story, and – if it is difficult or awkward the first time – to tell it again and again. This exercise in honesty is meant to not only create solidarity with others in the program, but also to open the door to hope; to help create what Richard Rohr calls “a desperate desiring” for change.²

The story that we hear Jesus tell in Luke is that the prodigal son, the one who wasted his inheritance in a distant land, encounters a famine and realizes that he needs to go back home if he is going to survive. At this point, we can’t be sure whether he is truly sorry about what he has done, or whether he is simply desperate and desiring food. Maybe it doesn’t matter. Either way, he makes the decision to return, planning to beg for a job working as a servant for his Father, since he no longer feels worthy to be called or treated as a son.

But if we thought this father acted unconventionally before – granting his younger son’s request for his inheritance with no questions asked – now his actions are even more surprising. As we heard in the reading, the Father ran to greet his Son on the road, then wrapped his arms around him and kissed him. While the son tries to explain himself, the father is busy gathering a robe, a ring and sandals and ordering the preparation of a great feast. There are no inquiries about what happened while the son was away, no judgement about the insanity of having blown the entire inheritance. For, as we hear the father say, “this son of mine was dead and is alive again; was lost and is found!” And so, the celebration begins.

David Sellery describes the prodigal child this way: “He was The Beloved. He was born and raised in love. He abused it and strayed from it. He squandered it and returned broken and sorrowful; begging at best for some miserable scrap of mercy. But that’s not what he found. He walked right back into unbounded love... not a grudging acceptance or a plea bargain, not even tough love with lots of strings attached. His father ran wildly to meet him, to embrace him, to rejoice in him, to love and forgive him.”³

The parable of the Prodigal Son points to our own “lostness,” no matter whether or not we have been a prodigal ourselves; caught up on some addictive behavior or another. We may not have traveled to some faraway land and blown our

² Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, p. 7

³ David Sellery, “The Beloved”

way through a fat wad of cash, but each of us has had the experience of estrangement. “To be lost,” says Karoline Lewis, “is to reject relationship, to be absent of relationship, or to be in a relationship where all you feel is ‘lostness.’”⁴ The answer to our “lostness” is the restoration or recovery of those relationships that we have rejected, have deemed unimportant, or have felt are not worth our time.

With an active addiction – whether it is to a particular drug of choice or to betting too much or to working too long – relationships are often discounted, ignored and abused. These can include both our human and divine relationships. In our “lostness,” we forget that we are beloved, and that we also have the capacity and responsibility to love others. Recovery means discovering new ways of thinking and managing our feelings, thus new ways of acting and responding to others. We stop recycling the old behaviors that don’t work and learn more effective ways of seeing and coping with life’s problems.

The insanity that is referred to in this Second Step is about how we experience ourselves and the world around us; more than a specific description of destructive habits. It refers to the ways that we can become stuck; bound to something that we cannot free ourselves from on our own, unable to go either backwards or forwards without some outside help.⁵

While AA sometimes makes specific references to God, it typically uses the language of *Higher Power*. For, as the Big Book of AA puts it, “when we speak to you of God, we mean your conception of God.” It may well be that those who begin to work on Step Two are not able or ready to conceive of a divine Parent; it may be that when working through an addiction, it could be the support group itself – or particular members of it – that are the first faces of acceptance, mercy, and grace.

There was a period of my life when it was difficult for me to picture the unconditional love and acceptance of God in the form of a Father. In my eyes, my own biological father was behaving more like the prodigal, seemingly squandering away everything he had – including his marriage to my mother and relationship with his children – in the pursuit of a new wife and a new life. It took time for me to see that – as an adult child of my father – I had the power to take on the role of forgiver in our relationship; that – if I wanted to repair it – I could choose to meet him on the road and offer the robe, the ring and the fatted calf.

What I came to understand was that to remain stuck in my anger towards my father – and my resentment toward his second wife – was an act of insanity. Because, no matter how hard I tried, I was not going to change this new family dynamic. That was the First Step; to admit the “I can’t” – that I was powerless, that it was out of my

⁴ Karoline Lewis, “Perspective Matters”

⁵ Steve Jester, “Unstuck”

hands. Only then could I work on the Second Step, to come to believe not that a Power greater than me (already) *had*, but that it *could* restore sanity; or, in the spiritual language that we are testing for recovery: that it could offer salvation.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is such a powerful story of salvation because it shows us that with God, all things are possible. No matter how far – literally or not – we remove ourselves from God, no matter how sick or broken our relationships might become, God is searching for us and longing for our return to health – to lives of well-being. The extravagant, no-holds-barred love of the Father for his lost and returned son reminds us that none of us are defined by our “lostness;” that we are more than the sum of our brokenness. Whatever our situation or condition happens to be, it is not the most important thing about us. Instead, the hope of recovery and healing help us understand that our primary identity is – and always has been – as a beloved child of God.

How these relationships play out beyond the Jesus’ words in this parable is left to our imagination. In the subsequent verses, we hear a conversation between the father and his older, resentful son; but whether he chooses to come in and join that party, and rejoin in relationship with his family – as a brother and son – remains a mystery for us to ponder.

And yet, as the words of the Second Step remind us, our conception of God, our salvation as a child of God, and the well-being of our relationships with others are intricately related. Our spiritual, mental, emotional, and social health begins at that place where we realize that – with God’s help – we need no longer remain stuck; that though we cannot go back, we can move forward in hope. It may take work, but are not alone. AMEN.