

Just like the story we read last week, Jesus leaves his parable open ended. What will the elder son do? What do *you* think he should do? Should he stand firm and demand some recompense from his brother, or should he let go of his anger and join the party?

As I read this story, it occurs to me that, while the elder son is expressing anger toward his father, I think he is actually angry at his brother. The younger son, by demanding his inheritance early, dishonored and insulted his father; in essence, he said, “I wish you were dead.” Then, he abandoned all his obligations to his family—including his responsibility to care for his father in his old age—and got as far away as possible, leaving his brother holding the bag. In his anger, the elder assumes—or imagines—the worst of the younger and is unwilling even to acknowledge him as family—which may be appropriate, given that the younger brother is the one who cut those ties.

All this makes me pay attention to the context in which Jesus tells this parable. He’s speaking to Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling about the kind of people with whom Jesus spends time. His story is aimed at them, and seems to ask whether they will let their beliefs about morality and holiness and purity keep them from enjoying God’s party. It reminds me that Paul, too, is writing in the context of conflict. Although it’s hard to be certain exactly what happened, he seems to have had some sort of disagreement with the Corinthian church, leaving some of them upset at him. As he’s writing about reconciliation, he’s encouraging them to not only be reconciled to God, but to himself.

Reconciliation is different from forgiveness. It recognizes that our actions have consequences which sometimes damage relationships; they can’t simply be forgotten. But, just as some actions have the power to damage relationships, others have the power to heal them. Reconciliation is the hard work of acting to heal broken relationships.

In the Text Study this week, we talked at length about what it means to be reconciled to God, and what our part is in that. If God takes the first steps—like the father in the parable—what is left for us to do? How might we—how can we—work to heal our relationships with God? As I read these stories, I’m left wondering if being reconciled with God is as much about being reconciled with one another; if maybe those two things are not separate.

A major theme of our Lenten reflection each year is on repentance from sin. The Greek and Hebrew words for “sin” mean to miss the mark, or to fall short. Sin is not about morality, but about failing to live in the way God created us to live. Most often, it is seen in the ways that we

harm one another; but what we sometimes overlook is that even the sins that seem to be purely against God—idolatry, for example—have implications in how we treat one another. Who and how we “worship”—the guiding principles in our lives—necessarily inform and shape our relationships: whether we act with justice or value fairness; the value we give to other people, especially those not in our in-group; the standards by which we judge our neighbors.

I think about the things that are killing us—war, poverty, oppression, climate change, racism, crime, xenophobia—and I notice that these are the results of our disunity with one another and creation. Reading these kinds of stories, I so often hear from people a veiled fear of God’s punishment for failing to live up to the standards they set; but I wonder if our biggest problem isn’t God’s wrath, but rather the natural consequences of our own sins. I hear God inviting us in these stories to a better way of being in the world, one that is balanced and healthy, based on love rather than greed or fear or hatred.

And yet, as I consider these same sins, I can’t help but notice that at their core is very often an imperfect kind of love. We go to war, for example, to protect the people and the places we care about; we just neglect to care for the people and the places on the other side. Poverty, racism and oppression are the consequences of hoarding resources or privilege for ourselves, afraid that, by sharing, there won’t be enough for ourselves or our families or our communities, of loving some groups of people more than others. Pollution and destruction of the earth comes from carelessness, the placing of our needs above the needs of our ecosystems.

Love may be the root of these things, but it is a love that has fallen short of what God intends it to be. We love, but our love is limited, finite. God’s love, on the other hand, is infinite. The father in Jesus’ parable seems to value his younger son more than he does whatever property he squandered or insults he gave. He values his elder son more than the party he’s hosting or the celebration of a child returned from the dead. That kind of love is what we aim for, but we end up shooting ourselves in the foot, wounded by our own sin.

Earlier in his letter, Paul writes about the heavenly ‘home’ which God has waiting for us, and he says that the guarantee of this promise is the Holy Spirit which God has given us. This Spirit is the one who draws us together, gathers and strengthens us as community. She is the one, Paul writes elsewhere, who gives individuals gifts, like preaching or prophecy, to build up the community. She is also the one who we recognize hovering over the waters at creation as God

speaks everything into being. Paul believes that we are created to be in community with one another, with the whole creation, and with God. That is the promise her presence guarantees.

Community, of course, has its challenges. Wherever two or three are gathered, Jesus may be present, but so is conflict. Community is hard, and so easily broken. We so easily turn away from one another, cast blame and exclude one another because our love is not enough. We see it in churches all the time; but also in politics, schools, and anywhere else people come together. Love, at times, may feel like a trick that we simply can't master; a skill for which we may not have the aptitude. Our inability to love perfectly keeps condemning us to the same old cycle of distrust, fear and violence.

And yet, God's promise is that community is our destiny; not the tiny communities we have now, cliques and groups and societies based on ethnicity or social class or nationality, but Community with a capital "C," the Community of God, held together by the Holy Spirit. Her presence among us now is the guarantee that this is not what may be if we work hard enough, but what will be, regardless.

In the beginning, we recall, when God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was formless and void and the Spirit of God brooded over the face of the deep, God spoke light and creation into being. With a word, God created humankind in God's own image, male and female. God did this in love. God did this by means of love. God did this so that we might love. We are created in love, by love, and for love. That Love is at our core, the image in which we are created and still bear, the *imago dei*, the image of God.

Our human nature—what Paul sometimes refers to as “the flesh”—distorts and hides this image, but it's still there, inside of us, God alive in us, deep at our core. The Spirit testifies to this presence of God within us. She says that love is not some skill that we will never master, but that it is, in fact, our Source—and therefore, also our destiny.

As I think about the imperfect, falling short love that marks our existence now, I begin to see not only the ways it misses the mark, but also what it is trying so hard to imitate. It makes me think of a child, learning by example. Little kids learn by imitating their parents and the adults they respect. At first, their imitations are poor and clumsy—cute, we call them—but over time and with practice, they get more and more refined, until in adulthood, we finally become proficient at the things we've been watching others do.

I think this is what Paul is referring to when he talks about the new creation in Christ: I think he means that the old, human way of thinking and being—the phrase he uses in Greek is “according to the flesh”—dies with Christ; it “passes away,” like childhood. He sees the “adult” creation emerging from what dies and is left behind: a new creation. This is the message God has given him to share, he says; and I find it interesting that the NRSV chooses to translate that word as “message” rather than what it is in Greek: the Word of reconciliation, just like the Word that God spoke into the formless void at creation, just like the Living Word that became incarnate in Palestine. Reconciliation—healing into community—is the Word God speaks to create us—and everything—*anew*.

I hear today Paul inviting us to see this vision with him, begging us to look inside, past the fear and anger, past the old hurts and half-healed scars, past the flesh, and to see buried deep within ourselves the Love that has always been there from the beginning; to know that this Love is our source and our goal. It is our destiny, what we are still being created to be. When Christ died, he died for all, Paul reminds us, therefore all have died. What remains is a new creation; there is no longer any need to hang onto old fears, old prejudices, old ‘human points of view.’ When our bodies eventually die and our flesh passes away, we will finally be gathered into the Community of God; but that doesn’t mean we have to wait for death. The Spirit is upon us now, within and among us, inviting us to experience that Community here and now.

What’s left to us it to figure out what that reconciliation looks like. For those among us with privilege and power, like the scribes and Pharisees, maybe it looks like putting aside our fears and prejudices; but what about for those among us who are vulnerable? When is it appropriate to forgive sins, and when is it more necessary to atone for them? Where and how do you see God calling us to heal and be healed so that we might join the party?