

Sermon Text for October 2, 2016

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Luke 15:3-7, Genesis 46:28-34

“Reunited!”

One of the greatest rewards a pastor receives is when we experience and are instruments of reconciliation. Throughout my time as a pastor I have had a lot of those experiences and it is one of the things that reminds me constantly of why I do what I do. When I was a pastor in Italy there were many times when I was able to bring together children with their parents after years of abuse and neglect. In Florida I was able to bring a grown son together with his father after decades of separation. In Russia we were able to bring together a refugee from the Congo together with her daughter and resettle them in the United States. Here, the joy of bringing couples together in marriage even after a life of wandering and loneliness. There are many situations where we can be direct vehicles for God in reconciliation and wholeness. On this world communion Sunday it is a thrill to have been able to see God’s work of reconciliation and reuniting all around the world.

Genesis and really all of Scripture is a saga, the story of God reaching out to us, bringing us back into the fold, and then time after time we insist on breaking away from God, we end up being broken once again, then God takes us back in to heal and comfort us. My favorite image of this is God walking in the Garden calling out to Adam “Where are you?” There is Psalm 139 which states where can I go from your presence and where can I flee from your Spirit? Think of the prodigal son, the story of Judges, Jonah, Jesus who came to gather us together since we have strayed so far. The story of the Bible is really the story of re-union between us and God. Stories of our unfaithfulness which can only be matched and overcome by God’s steadfast love. The end result is inevitably re-union.

Today in Genesis we have the saga of the happy reunion between Joseph and his father Jacob. This Scriptural reunion between father and son we pair with the parable in Luke of what we call the lost sheep and I call the found sheep. These are stories that remind us of God’s intense desire to be re-united with those whom he loves, even if we

choose to wander.

We are going to ask ourselves some difficult questions today in light of these scriptures which command us to emphasize ministries of re-union for those who do not know God and ask how effective we are, and what have we done lately to re-unite God's children with their father.

Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel in Rome is one of art's finest treasures. Understandably the entire chapel contains biblical themes from both the Old and the New Testaments. You could spend the entire day in there and get a feel for all of Scripture from beginning to end. Genesis, of course, is one of the emphases of the room. The ceiling is covered with the 7 days of creation. Right in the middle of the ceiling we have the very famous fresco of the creation of Adam with God coming out from the clouds extending his fingers toward Adam and Adam already created and lazily if not nonchalantly extending his hand toward God where you can imagine the inevitable contact being made. But God has this fierce determined look as if he were saying I'm going to make this contact happen.

A friend of mine has this picture in his office and from God's mouth a balloon quote comes up that states "stay in touch". You can almost imagine God repeating throughout history, sometimes with a bit of exasperation, stay in touch. The idea that the farther away we are from God, the less we actually touch, and experience God, the less we will be able to understand and appreciate God.

Our entire lives we find ourselves trying constantly to keep in touch, be united with God, but we face such difficult pressures and especially the current thoughts on keeping in touch with God. Some say that it deprives you of family time. But what a better time can you imagine for quality family time than in church? Some say that being in touch with God takes the fun out of life. I used to think that until I realized the freedom we have in Christ. But until you realize how much God desires to be re-united with us, until we recognize the lengths that God has gone to stay in touch with us, until then it will be difficult for us to structure our lives around the one who has given us life.

Genesis gives us an example in the reunion of Jacob and Joseph of God's desire to be in touch with us. In this Scripture we find Jacob finally reunited with his son Joseph. It is an emotional reunion as you would expect it to be. Who would not be emotional

seeing their father or their son after more than 20 years. When we come into contact with our Father, with our creator there should also be some emotion, some awe, some feelings involved. Goose bumps can be signs that you are in the presence of the Lord. Do not let anyone tell you that emotions detract from the true worship of God. As if only with the mind can we understand God. It is the heart which provides us with the proof that we have encountered God.

When Jacob sees for himself that his son is alive and well a true re-union and celebration takes place. Jacob's celebration is found in his words that follow the reunion. I can die now that I know that you live. His celebration is found in the realization that his life is complete, before there was something missing, out of place, a hole in my soul, but no longer, now I am complete in this reunion. In our own lives completeness, fullness of life, even the actual meaning of our life can only come through our reunion with Christ. How often do you find yourself out of touch with Christ and what do you feel when that happens? Incomplete, something is missing, something of consequence, of life or death. Our own spiritual journeys can only be complete in Christ.

This Genesis story, and also our Luke parable, give us the thought that God is incomplete without his children all together, without all of the sheep in the fold something is missing even with God. What a thought, that as each person comes to know Christ, gets back in touch with the creator, is re-united with our God, it not only makes that person complete, but provides a piece to complete the fulfillment of God's kingdom here on this earth.

In Luke that is certainly the case in the parable of found sheep. It speaks to the joy in finding that which is lost. Jesus begins by asking the question wouldn't all of you leave 99 sheep in the wilderness, to fend for themselves, in the midst of wolves and lions, in order to search until you find one lost sheep. My immediate thought is no actually, I would cut my loses because I wouldn't want to risk and lose the other 99. What's the sense in that if you are talking about our livelihood.

But if you are talking about a lost child then yes, I would because all reason goes out the window when a child is missing. We will find that child at all costs. The parable describes what happens when the sheep is found the shepherd rejoices, is complete, and tells neighbors and friends of the good news and they celebrate. In Ezekiel this is what

we read about God's love for us as the great Shepherd.

Now this parable deals specifically with salvation. Luke is telling us that a reunion with God causes celebration not only here on earth but also in the heavenly spheres.

In the reunion between Jacob and Joseph we find that Joseph's immediate reaction is that he wants to go and tell somebody, he wants to go and tell Pharaoh. These Scriptures combine to speak of God's mercy and gracious initiative which is especially manifested in the New Testament in Jesus' ministry to the lost. Some of us come from church backgrounds where we don't use that term because it implies that we are somehow found and thus better. Whatever. A person that is lost is someone who doesn't have a relationship with Christ.

God doesn't ever want to let go of us, but we tear away don't we? I want to ask us some hard questions today as a church. It is safer and much more within my comfort zone to deal with those within this fold. But how good are we in hitting the road looking for the lost? Interestingly, we are getting better and better, but it seems at the expense of our own kids, who aren't necessarily lost, have grown up in the church all their lives. I think of our youth group that has mastered going after the lost, but at the expense of those within the flock. We have a number of our own kids who choose not to go to youth group, my girls included, because we are so good at going after the lost. Why do we have to choose between one or the other?

We need more of our programs to be sheep collectors, because quite a few of us were wandering lost out there, and then we were found. Is there a sense of going out until you find the person, until that person comes to know Christ and becomes an active member of the body of Christ? Is there a sense of passion where if we invite someone to church and they experience God that we hug them and weep on each other's neck because they have been reunited with their creator?

We have to ensure that our emphasis doesn't shift from reuniting the lost with God and move away to making sure God doesn't escape from our grasp, and we struggle to hold on without taking risks and emphasizing programs that cater to our needs and desires instead of the needs of those who truly need to keep in touch with God. It was once said that we ought to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In other words to make our words relevant to what is happening in the world

around us. But I feel that we are hearing too many sermons about the newspaper and not enough about God's word of reunion with God's people. We hear too much preaching about ourselves and our problems and our realities and not enough about God's realities and redemption.

Our emphasis in this church needs to be on feeling complete because we can rejoice with the angels when we have been re-united with God and those who have gone away have come back from a time away. This is where our emphasis needs to be, to stay in touch with God, so we can reach out and touch someone, so they can be reunited with God. Amen.