

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 27, 2022

Psalm 32:1–11 (ESV):

1 Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

2 Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

3 For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

5 I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

6 Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.

7 You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

9 Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,

which must be curbed with bit and bridle,
or it will not stay near you.

10 Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.

11 Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

1st Scripture Reading: Isaiah 12:1–6 (ESV):

The Lord Is My Strength and My Song

12 You will say in that day:

“I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
that you might comfort me.

2 “Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation.”

3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4 And you will say in that day:

“Give thanks to the LORD,
call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted.

5 “Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be made known in all the earth.

6 Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

EPISTLE: 2 Corinthians 5:16–21 (ESV):

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Gospel: Luke 15:1–3, 11-32(ESV):

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

3 So he told them this parable:

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

11 And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father,

and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” ’ 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ 31 And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’ ”

Sermon 13 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

“Beyond Flesh”

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Dear friends,

Our reading from Corinthians today is used most often to talk about missionary work, a mission text if you will. The bits at the end strengthen this and I think it can be

used for that. Paul says that we are ambassadors for Christ, after all, and those words stand. All that said, as with other popular texts, those parts of the Bible that just get out there and are well known, I think we would benefit from looking at all of it. Paul says a lot of things in this reading before he gets to the whole “ambassadors for Christ” part, and I want to give some airtime to some of those words. Paul tells us that the reality that we see is not the whole reality. As trippy as that sounds, he makes a good case that what we see cannot tell us everything, what we hear tells us even less, and that there is always more going on and we should have the humility to recognize that.

Paul has been spending time, in this chapter, on the fundamental tension that takes place in a Christian heart. He talks throughout chapter 5 of a lot of the consequences of this tension. What tension is that? We are all creatures of this earth, you and I. We are born here, all we know and love is here. All our people, our lands, our memories, are all about this Earth and this life. But this earth is full of sin and even those people that we love can break our hearts and hurt us tremendously. The tension, to put it briefly is this: This is a beautiful world and our lives within can be wonderful, the people we love can be such a joy and a delight, the times we have can be so great, the memories we make can be warm and sweet and lovely. But this is also an ugly world, wracked by war, pride, greed. Many suffer, and the times of our lives can be agony as much as they can be awesome. Our memories can be a trap, fooling us into thinking that the trauma of the past is playing out again before our eyes. How to feel about your life can be a real puzzle when the evidence presents you with such a mixed bag. So that's what Paul is talking about. He says that we groan in our hearts, wanting to be in heaven, but we're still here, and part of us wants to stay here too.

After talking about how God is the reason for this, how God gives us Christian hearts, and our Christian hearts long to be with our Savior. There is more to a human being than just the body and the mind. One of the things our society tries to sell us very aggressively is that human beings are biological machines, we are animals. We are not. We have souls, we have a deep, fundamental essence of ourselves that goes beyond anything that can be studied or explained. On this basis, Paul says what he says next.

“16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

That first part is most important to me. We regard no one according to the flesh, Paul says. That little phrase packs a lot of meaning into it. What does this mean? When you are faced with another human being, when you are talking to somebody or watching somebody, try to remember this truth. That person that you are talking to, that person that you are thinking about, is not just the person that you see with your eyes. If you know them well, remember that there is way more to that person than you can ever know. If you don't know them, remember that no matter what you may learn about them, that person is still a stranger to you. Each of the people you meet every day has a soul, they have depths, hopes, and dreams that you could never imagine, things about them that you could never learn. More to the point, remember that this person's soul isn't just a mystery, it is beyond your judgment. You don't know that person's real struggles, even if that person is a lover or close friend. You can't. You can empathize but you cannot ever truly walk in a person's shoes, see through another's eyes. There's always more to them.

Paul doesn't just say this, though. He reminds us to say this to ourselves in a Christian way. Not only is there more to their personality, but there's more to their Christianity, there's more to their soul, than we could ever learn. Why is all this important? Because it helps slow down our natural tendency to judge, to categorize, to condemn. Regard no one according to the flesh. You'll never really know them like God knows them. Remembering that helps us slow down our tendency to judge and scorn them and think ourselves better than them. It keeps us humble, it keeps us from thinking we are God. All we humans can do is think of people as other humans. It is hard to see the soul, sometimes we catch glimpses of what might be around the edges, but we never know it all. God does. And God tells us that this person is our neighbor, that He is the judge, and that we are not.

Paul says we used to think of Jesus as just a person, but now we know He is far more, chiefly because He isn't with us anymore. He's in heaven, reigning with God. Look at your neighbor like you like at Jesus. That's not a bad way to start, so try that. Try looking at your neighbor and thinking, no matter what they do, no matter how they treat you, no matter what they say, "Jesus is in there somewhere." It is a unique exercise, in my experience. In the same way, our brothers and sisters in Christ, both in this church and beyond, whoever has Christian faith, they are far more than just human. They are also Christian, which means they are saved, which means God loves them, which means God cares about how you treat them. If anyone is in Christ He is a new creation, and that means you should see them that way, every day.

All of this talk of perspective feeds into and reinforces what Paul is about to say next. **"18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."** All this happens, both to us and to others, because Christ reconciles us to Himself. This is from God, Paul says that very clearly, we cannot manage this perspective, this respect for people's souls. We're too sinful, too judgmental, too quick to think that we know it all. God must enter into our hearts and change them, and this is one of the ways that He changes our hearts. He doesn't allow us to see people as just big walking sacks of meat and problems. He doesn't allow us to so shallowly think we have it all figured out. He gets into our hearts and reminds us that we have a soul that no one else can know fully. If that's the case for us, it must be the case for others. He does not count our trespasses against us. I know that sounds like standard Lutheran bread-and-butter fare, but do not minimize this. Christ creates, within our hearts, the forgiveness and reconciliation that we demonstrate. Christ makes it so we can share forgiveness, share understanding, and yes, share what He has done too. Jesus makes that happen, and it doesn't happen abstractly to you, it happens to you and you can therefore take it and make it happen to others. The time so and so snapped at you, treated you poorly, put you down? You can forgive them that, because and only because Christ has forgiven you. That

is how we are ambassadors for Christ, dear friends. Not through theological treatises, not through writing big books, not through saying everything exactly the right way at exactly the right time. None of that. We are ambassadors for Christ by demonstrating the forgiveness Christ has shown to us.

We all know we can be jerks, and we all know how intimidating that sounds. Well, that's just another angle to get the thing that you most crave. If you want to have the courage to talk about Jesus but don't know how, if you feel like you've failed in all these things Paul says to do, look at what He says. Be reconciled to God. You can't give someone something you don't have. You cannot give forgiveness when you haven't been forgiven yourself, you cannot talk about a Jesus you don't know. Your sins aren't a sign you've failed. Your sins are an opportunity to receive that forgiveness again, to learn more about Christ and His love for you, and the more you learn, the easier it is to talk about, even if words aren't your thing. Christ loves sinners, He loves you, and He can teach you to love sinners too. It starts with recognizing, hey, I am one of those sinners. I have done these things wrong, or been this way or that way, and I need someone to change that, I need this to end.

That is how we share Christ. Firstly, and most importantly, by knowing Christ. That is how we forgive, firstly and most importantly, by being forgiven ourselves.

Amen.