

Chaplain's Corner – January 2017

January, 2017. We are at the beginning of a new year and it seems only natural to look ahead and hope for more pleasant things than facing the bitterness and bite of winter's cold weather. While we see that the daylight is slowly increasing once again, still winter holds onto us with a tight grip and it seems as if the warmth of summer's glow will never come in time.

While we know for certain that winter is just a temporary season and that we can count on the gradual return of more comfortable temperatures with spring and summer, it is perhaps harder to feel as confident about the restoration of warmth in our spiritual life, especially if we have been stuck in a very long period of spiritual winter and find it next to impossible to feel the warmth of God's presence right now. For many, the searing pain of life's slings and arrows is so deep that it seems as though God must surely have abandoned us and we are left alone, without hope or any assurance that He is still there or that we would be welcomed if we called out to Him for help.

This is not a new story. The same anguish has been felt by untold numbers of people throughout the ages, most deeply by those who have come to see that their rebellious ways and years spent living apart from God and His ways have left them feeling unworthy and so unlovable that they cannot imagine ever being forgiven or accepted again. Let us take, as an example, the parable of the prodigal son spoken by Jesus to the Pharisees and scribes who criticized Him for associating with the outcasts of their society, the tax collectors and other "sinners" (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus tried to demonstrate to the hard-hearted members of the religious elite of that day that God cared for everyone and rejoiced when they returned to Him with a humble attitude. He first spoke of joy the shepherd who goes in search of and recovers one lost sheep from his flock (15:4-7), then that of a woman who lost and then searched earnestly for and found a lost coin (15:8-10), but He saved the most important story for last. Jesus then related a story of the younger of two brothers becoming impatient to inherit his portion of his father's estate and demanding of his father that he give it to him right away. According to Jewish traditions of the day, two thirds of the father's estate would pass to the eldest son and if there was a second son he would be entitled to one third of the father's estate after his death. Clearly unconcerned about the implied message of saying he wished his father was dead and was only interested in what money he could get from him, the son made this outrageous and insulting demand so that he could live extravagantly on riches he did not deserve or have a legal right to at the time.

While I'm sure most of us would find it hard to imagine what the father of that son felt, and it is likely few of us would be as accommodating or willing to cash out a major portion of our personal holdings and life savings to hand over to such a rebellious child, Jesus described the prodigal son's father doing this without any recorded protest or hesitation. Not surprisingly, the son is not described as showing any gratitude for what the father bestowed on him but rather "not so many days after" he takes all the money he was given and departs to a distant country, where he promptly spent and wasted away the inheritance with "prodigal living." The story does

not go into many specifics at that point but a bit later on the older brother complains about how his wayward brother had “devoured” the father’s livelihood “with harlots” so we can well imagine that the money was poured out for any and all sorts of personal indulgences and temporary pleasures. In this, I’m sure, most of us can relate to times in our own lives when we let temptations and pursuit of pleasures take control of at least part of our lives, with varying degrees of personal ruin resulting.

Jesus went on to spin the tale to bring into clear focus just how desperate the young man became in the far off country after his money was all gone. Instead of being surrounded and helped by his “fair weather friends” who had been all too willing to spend time with him when he was able to buy the food, drink and sensual pleasures that so quickly consumed the inheritance, the man found himself alone, hungry and without anyone willing to give him anything. He grew so desperate that he hired himself out to tend pigs, an animal that Jews saw as unclean and detestable! He apparently was paid very little for this menial work, to the point that he looked hungrily upon the husks and pods that he was supposed to give the pigs to eat! Talk about being at rock bottom; imagine having to wrestle with pigs to steal some of the garbage that they are eating!

At this point Jesus tells of how the young man “came to himself” or “came to his senses” and took a look at the appalling state he was in, remembering how lavish his life was back home and how even his father’s hired servants had “bread enough to spare” while he was starving. He decides to return home, but feeling ashamed and unworthy to be called a son, he plans to beg his father to take him back as a lowly hired servant.

As we most likely recall from hearing this story at some point in our lives, as the son made the journey back towards his father’s estate and poured over and over in his mind how he would make his desperate plea for mercy to his father, the father saw him while still a great distance down the road. The father is noted to immediately have compassion for the lost son and instead of waiting for the son to make his way up the road, the father runs to him, embraces him and kisses him before the son can say a single word. While the son protests that he is no longer worthy to be called his son the father refuses to accept that, calls for his servants to bring the best robe in the home and put it on him, to put a ring on his finger (a sign of status like the signet rings used by royalty to seal letters with wax) and to bring sandals for his feet and to slaughter and roast a fatted calf to make a feast in celebration of the son’s return. The father’s words explaining his actions were that: “For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (15:24) and for that reason they were to be merry.

The story very strongly conveys Jesus’ message that each and every one of us is precious in God’s sight and that He delights in our coming to our senses and recognizing our overwhelming need for Him as the first thing in our lives. But it also gives us a very clear picture of some very important aspects of God’s character and His heart. Like the father of the prodigal son, when we act in rebellion and decide to turn away from Him, even though He is all powerful He does not stand in our way or manipulate us to force us to not do things that are sinful or

harmful to us. This is one aspect of God's character that many people over the ages have struggled to understand or appreciate, that He is willing to step aside and let us have free will and make decisions even if they are extremely painful to Him and He knows that they will expose us to danger or painful loss. Critics and skeptics have often pointed to the presence of evil in the world and claimed that this means that God is either not all powerful or that He is not all good. Instead, it only shows that He is all patient and that while He knows our choices to sin and rebel against His ways brings pain, destruction or even death to us and others, only by letting us be able to choose to come to Him of our own free will can we really experience the love He offers. If we were compelled to obey Him without the ability to choose differently we would be robots, not beloved children.

Another aspect of God's character that is displayed through the story is that He is not disinterested and is always "on the lookout" and watching down the road, eagerly awaiting even the most rebellious of us to turn back and return to Him. Like the father who watched the road and spotted his son from far away, God is still keeping an eye on us even when we are far from him. We may not always feel He is close or caring, but that is our refusal to look for Him, not His turning away from us.

This parable also gives a further glimpse into an important aspect of God. He does not sit passively on His throne in heaven, awaiting on us to bring ourselves to Him, but when he senses even a beginning of our hearts turning back towards home He comes running to us! This is also a bit of foreshadowing of the heart of the gospel message that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation or pay the guilt debt we deserve, but He had to come to us by sending Jesus to pay the debt for us.

It is also clear from the parable that God delights in giving to us things far beyond that which we deserve or could pay for on our own behalf. While the prodigal son was speaking logically and with human truth that he did not deserve to be considered a son of the father after what he had done, the father's love washed away such arguments and he was so delighted to have the son back with him that he embraced him and restored riches to him from his own resources. God wants to do the same for all of us, He has made a way for that to happen by sending Jesus to pay for our sins with His death and by this gift, opened a path for us to come back to God washed clean and totally accepted.

The parable does not end quite yet. There is the matter of the older brother, who had stayed behind, honoring his father, never leaving the home and working hard in the fields during the time (years?) when the younger brother went off to squander his inheritance. It is clear that this brother was not pleased to see his sibling show up again and especially not to see the father throwing a feast in celebration. Bitterness and anger were his feelings, not joy at the reunion. The father assured the older brother that all the father owns is his inheritance and that they should still be happy that the younger brother, whom they had feared was dead, has been found. Jesus does not give us any hint as to whether the elder brother ever "came round" to accept the younger one or not, but it is worth considering that even though we can be sure that God is ready

and eager to forgive us when he repent and come back to Him, we may still face many challenges and negativity from other people in our lives, even when we do make positive spiritual changes. But like the bite of January and February that still can freeze us to our bones if not in a warm shelter, we can rest assured that God's love and warmth can sustain us even when those we had placed our trust in turn away and still reject us. God promises to forgive, but healing of broken relationships here on earth is not guaranteed nor are we assured of being spared from the consequences of our past actions. Such changes in our earthly situation may come much slower and require longer periods of relying on God's grace to give us strength to carry on and continue to work to make amends and rebuild trust in the relationships battered and fractured by our past choices.

It is my fervent prayer and abiding hope that all who hear will take into their hearts the truth conveyed in this parable and like the starving and desperate prodigal son, "come to our sense" and make the life saving decision to come home to God and accept His unfathomable mercy and grace to accept us as His own precious and very much loved children.

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