

LENT: JOURNEYING TO THE CROSS

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2010

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Palms Up and Open: The Art of Letting Go

The Christian life is a balance between activity and passivity. There are some things that we need to do and must hold dear and keep close to our heart. This is the active life of Christianity. The list of these activities is well known: worship, prayer, community, etc. For the most part, we are relatively good at “doing” these things and committing them to practice through rites and rituals in the religious life. The activity of holding-on comes easier in a culture that is driven to consume, compete and control.

That’s what is so difficult about the story of the prodigal son. One wonders how the father lets his youngest son go without putting up much of a fight to keep him from leaving – at least the fight for control of the son’s life between parent and child is never mentioned in the passage. This passage teaches us a profound lesson related to the passive life of Christianity, or, what I would call “the art of letting go.” The father is characterized by love, faithfulness and reliability. He ultimately lets go of his self-will – his will to control. This flies in the face of Western culture that holds to the conviction that “it is better for me to be in control than someone else.” This story says to the reliable, “Let go of your self-will.”

There are two other characters in the story that demand attention as well. The younger son only thinks about himself; he is the poster child of self-centeredness! Even when he is at “rock-bottom” he only thinks about himself: “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger” (Luke 15:17)! The story doesn’t necessarily portray the younger son as contrite and broken; rather, he is hungry and wants food – not the interpretation that we’ve heard in sermons! The lesson here is for the rebellious: let go of your self-centeredness.

And finally the neglected older son. Throughout the story he is the one who is obedient and faithful to his father. If we read the first verses of Luke 15, we know that the older brother represents the Pharisees and the scribes – religious to a fault. His frustration is understandable but, ultimately, he is the one who is disciplined in the story: “Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found’” (Luke 15:31-32). The lesson of passivity here is for the religious: let go of your self-righteousness.

This well-known story teaches us to turn our palms up and open them. This physical posture of release and letting go is difficult for those who are “doers,” but it is a vital part of the Christian life. According to Richard Foster, this posture helps us experience “the freedom of the self sins: self-sufficiency, self-pity, self-absorption, self-abuse, self-aggrandizement, self-castigation, self-deception, self-exaltation, self-

depreciation, self-indulgence, self-hatred, and a host of others just like them.”¹ Let it go! Amen.

¹Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), p. 54.

This week's Reflection was prepared by the Rev. K. Jason Coker, an ordained minister with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and pastor of Wilton Baptist Church in Wilton, Connecticut. Visit www.wiltonbaptist.org to learn more about the ministries of Wilton Baptist Church.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: East Caribbean – With thanks to God for the massive regional project for secondary schools, and with prayers for engagement among school students and staff, corporations, volunteers, and governments and for good coverage of the project on television, and with prayers for a vehicle and for liquidation of debts this year; **Haiti** – With prayers of thanks for the safety of the Bible Society staff following the severe earthquake of January 12, and with prayers of God's provision and grace in the lives of all who are suffering the personal devastation of loss of family members, homes, churches and personal possessions, and with prayers for all who are part of the relief effort that will continue for years to come as both immediate needs are supplied and long-term infrastructure is rebuilt; **Suriname** – With prayers for the elections to be held in May and that God will bring about positive changes in the country, and with prayers for the *Faith Comes By Hearing* projects and that many people will be impacted by seeing, hearing, and reading the Word of God, and with thanks to God for the development of Bible work, especially in **Guyana** and **French Guiana**, and with prayers for Bible translations projects in Suriname, Guyana, and French Guiana.

Activity Corner: “Forgiveness” Prayers

Supplies needed: Bible; 8-1/2” x 11” construction paper (assorted colors); pens or pencils; scissors.

Read together Psalm 32. Consider reading it antiphonally (females reading odd-numbered verses; males reading even-numbered verses). Discuss how one can feel “lost” when separated from God because of sin. Then talk about how forgiveness restores one to a right relationship with God. Invite everyone to trace their hand on a sheet of construction paper (folded to measure 5-1/2” x 8-1/2”) with their wrist against the fold. Cut out the hands so that they open up with the fold in the middle. On the front side of the hands, ask everyone to copy verse 1 from Psalm 32; on the inside the hands, ask everyone to copy verses 5 and 6a. Encourage everyone to use their folded “hands” throughout the week as a reminder to pray each day and confess their sins to God and seek God's forgiveness. Conclude by singing “Amazing Grace” or one of your favorite hymns about God's forgiveness and love.
