

Returning to the Sacred Way

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

March 27, 2022 Fourth Sunday in Lent

Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fourth Sunday in Lent. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

Bill Coffin liked to say that there is far more mercy in God than there is sin in us. The best definition of sin is not things we do wrong but a condition of separation from God, from our neighbor and from our true selves.

The great hope and joy of God's mercy is that the possibility always exists to overcome our separation. We see that here. No matter how disconnected we have been, we can come home to this church and find a loving community and spirit of compassion and care that helps us reconnect to God, one another and our truest, best self.

Bill Coffin also liked to say that God is at least as forgiving as the most forgiving human. The reverse is also true. Every human has the capacity to be as unconditionally loving as Jesus was.

Let us show that beautiful side of ourselves today, extending our compassion and care especially to those with whom we do not have a close connection, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: Lent is a season for the spirit of truth. Jesus emerged from the struggles and suffering of the wilderness in touch with his own deepest truth and the truth of humanity and all nature—the Spirit's truth. Moses and the children of Israel gained new understanding in the wilderness of their identity as children of God and of the ethics that flow from it.

One truth the Lenten wilderness reminds us of is that we all make mistakes, we all stray sometimes from the sacred way of love and light. We will hear some amazing words today assuring us that we can become a new creation and all that has been wrong in us can be made right in a moment, over and over, however often we fall.

The Spirit that we seek can transform us and lead us out to transform the world. The spiritual practices, words and music we offer here can open us to that transformation.

God's grace will forgive, embrace and guide us if we keep turning to the sacred way, so let us worship together....

Children's Time— Good morning! There are hundreds of different religions, like Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and every religion is divided into different types of groups. One kind has strict rules about who is in and who is out based on what you believe and how you behave. That type of group is typically called fundamentalist.

The opposite type of church or group of each religion sees all people as one and has compassion and love for all, including those who doubt or believe differently or whose behavior is not always perfect.

Jesus was Jewish and he was the kind that is open to all, but the fundamentalist scribes and Pharisees harshly criticized Jesus for welcoming people whom they considered outcasts because of wrongs or differences.

So Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons. The younger son asked the father for all the money that he was going to inherit, and the son went to another country and lived a wild life and wasted all his money. Then a famine hit and food was very expensive and he had no money left. He got a job feeding pigs but it paid so little that the pigs had better food than he did.

He was totally ashamed and afraid what his father would think of him, but he decided he would humble himself and go home and ask his father to hire him as a servant. When he came over the last hill his father looked up and went running toward him. The son told his father all his wrongs, but his father was so happy his son was home that he kissed him and put his own ring on him and made a great feast.

The older brother said hey, wait a minute, he wasted all the money you gave him and now you are honoring him, meanwhile I have been here working for you the whole time and you never gave me a feast. But his father said, you know I love you, but your brother was like dead and has come back to life, he was lost and now is found!

Jesus wanted religious people to see that love and forgiveness are more important than strict rules and expectations. It is not easy when someone has done something wrong to us and repents and tries to change, it is natural to feel like the brother and still want to punish or shut that

person out. When we are struggling to be as loving as Jesus, there is something we can do to help us be like the father... Pray! So let us pray the Lord's Prayer ...

Sermon: *Returning to the Sacred Way*

We cannot know if Jesus looked at his world and created the character of the Prodigal Son as an allegorical image for human civilization, but today the parallels are too clear to miss. The earth is our inheritance giving humanity all we need for a sufficient, sustainable, harmonious life, and today's dominant civilization has squandered it, laid it waste, hurt everyone and everything around us and bankrupted ourselves to the brink of extinction.

We are the Prodigal Son at rock bottom. Yet we are still increasing our speed in the wrong direction as anyone attuned to national and world news can see.

We can sink into depression at this or want to scream in outrage at the Prodigal Son of humanity. Yet we feel as helpless to fix it as we are to fix any child we love.

Well, welcome to Lent. Lent is the season for the Spirit of truth, for looking unflinchingly at our condition, which includes admitting how bad things are.

The Lenten wilderness is a harsh place. It strips away our illusion of immunity from the consequences of straying from the sacred way. It reduces us to the truth of our need for the help of a higher power.

The wilderness is a place of crucifixion, the dying of our false self, the self-emptying that is known in the Christian tradition by its Greek name, kenosis.

Yet as you know, if you remember the sermons from Advent, kenosis is the beginning of a path of tremendous hope, of resurrection, and few teachings of Jesus illustrate this path as well as the parable of the Prodigal Son.

There is a way out of the wilderness, and the profound thing about Jesus' teaching is that it works for both an individual and for any scale of community. It is the sacred way described in different terms by all spiritual traditions.

The ancient Christian words describing the stages of the path are:

- *kenosis*, or self-emptying;
- followed by *metanoia*, the growth and transformation of the heart and mind beyond where they are now in the direction of the heart and mind of Christ;

- followed by *agape*, the universal, unconditional compassion and love that flow from metanoia's wider perspective of oneness;
- followed by *koinonia*, the beloved community that Christ-like love builds.

We can travel this entire four step path many times a day as we face situations that give us the opportunity to self-empty and grow in love, and at the same time we can travel it over years, deepening and maturing in our ability to take each step.

The Prodigal Son teaching begins with Jesus eating with people who were outcasts according to the fundamentalist, rule-bound scribes and Pharisees. Jesus loved and served especially those who had hit rock bottom—the broke or broken, the incurably ill, the wrong-doers.

It was part of his own self-emptying to associate with people who would make him impure and an outcast like them. His self-emptying modeled three core ethical teachings of most religions, the Golden Rule, love of neighbor and care for those who are vulnerable or suffering.

But today's story shows that kenosis was more than an ethical position. The Prodigal Son character begins by filling himself with all the pleasures that the false self loves, and then he crashes. He is reduced to nothing externally. The life changing moment arrives when he becomes empty internally as well. He gives up his pride and turns in absolute humility back to his father.

Kenosis, giving up our false, selfish self, is the essential prerequisite for both ethical living and spiritual transformation. Self-emptying puts us in right relationship to both the external and internal worlds. All the good that comes to the Prodigal Son begins with that first step of kenosis.

Then comes metanoia, the Spirit's gift in response to kenosis of evolution to a new developmental and spiritual level, a new consciousness, our true self. The Prodigal Son shows signs of it in his humility, his acceptance of his faults, his courage in owning them and facing the community he has wronged, his new appreciation of his father, his determination to turn and make the journey home.

The result of kenosis and metanoia is the third Greek word, *agape*, or Christ-like love, another gift of the Spirit. The Prodigal Son fills with that love, and his father does, too. We do not see the father's path, but clearly he has undergone his own kenosis, letting go of the ego's

pride that could be offended by his son's behavior (like King Lear), and he has undergone the metanoia to see his son through eyes that allow him to love unconditionally.

These two hearts full of agape meet, and the result is koinonia, beloved community, symbolized in Jewish and Christian tradition by the great feast where everyone has a place at the table.

Jesus gives us the older brother as a foil, as an example of what those who have not been spiritually transformed think of the transformed people they do not understand, like the Pharisees looking at Jesus. The older son is unmoved by his father's loving action and explanation. It is a symbol for the struggle between a fundamentalist and open-hearted ethic.

Today's teaching from Jesus is important to our individual happiness—to paraphrase the Psalm, "Happy are the prodigals who return"—but it is about more than that. Jesus wants us to create the realm of God on earth, and the spiritual path of the Prodigal Son is the key.

Humanity needs to undergo a collective kenosis, we need to admit that we have hit rock bottom and return to the sacred way, turning to the higher power of our collective spiritual wisdom.

We cannot save this world without the metanoia that sees that expands our vision of oneness, and the agape and koinonia that go to any length to create one united earth community. Justice and peace and the choice to live sustainably depend on our living our true oneness.

Allow yourself to imagine the joy of a world whose every law or policy conforms to the Golden Rule and love of neighbor and care for the vulnerable and suffering and earth itself.

Jesus knew that this transformation has to take place from the inside out, and from the bottom up. We are a tiny church in a tiny village, and this is precisely where global transformation begins. Even smaller than that, it begins in each heart and grows through courageous action from there.

We can see countless examples of this throughout history. The film *Amazing Grace* shows the former slave-ship captain, Pastor John Newton, as an old man in the church where he wrote his hymns and preached against the slavery that he abhorred. Newton had gone blind, but in his blindness he began to see again the thousands of kidnapped African women and men he had carried to slavery. He relived the horror of the torture and murder that took place under his command.

We can imagine the devastation of Newton's kenosis as he wept out the penitence of his former self, and we can also feel the power of the metanoia and force of agape Christ-like love that filled his hymn "Amazing Grace" with hope and joy. His courageous preaching, his hymns and his books inspired the abolitionist movement to overcome impossible odds toward the koinonia of a world where all are free.

The sacred way can work miracles in us and in the world by the power of the Spirit that flows through us when we follow that four step path.

So let us empty and open ourselves to the life transforming, liberating, loving Spirit within us now. Let us pray in silence...

If We Take Gifts of Light from Our Creator
tune: Donne Secours 11.10.11.10.

If we take gifts of light from our Creator
And spoil and waste our whole inheritance,
Yet turn to God repenting our wrongs later,
God's love renews us through our penitence.

But what if humans ruin all Creation?
Can love restore the species we destroyed?
Is it too late to offer reparation?
Is death's despair our fate, a lightless void?

Hope will not die as long as some are living
Who give their whole lives turning life back right.
God has compassion, God is all forgiving,
God's force of love fills those who serve the light.

See earth as one, just, at peace, life-sustaining.
Christ calls you now: work till that world comes true.
Against great odds, ask not if light is gaining;
Ask only what God's love in you may do.

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Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The drumming of a ruffed grouse
was floating from the woods
like a music.