

A PURPOSE FOR YOU AND US
“Righting the Wrong You’ve Done”

TBC 129

(third in a series of six)

Psalm 32:1-5 & Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Fourth Sunday Morning in Lent, March 21, 2004

Every time I come to this text in Luke 15 I am reminded of the observation Frank Pollard made about it. It is so familiar that I’m not sure what else can be said about it. How do I preach such a well-known text to people who’ve heard it again and again? As I approached this word in this series on a purpose for you and us, I realized, once more, that preaching is no small task especially when one is dealing with a story as common as this one.

Most people in this room are so familiar with the story, or parable, of “The Prodigal Son” or more tellingly as Peter Rhea Jones suggests, the parable of “The Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother,” that the temptation is great to ignore it altogether and daydream during the sermon or even the reading of the passage aloud. If the truth be known, some of us may even be tempted to skip over it when reading the Bible – not because it is a bad story, but because we know it so well. Now if you are like me, you’ll have to make some confessions that you’ve entertained such temptations.

Do you ever find yourself ignoring scripture? I do – especially when I’m reading an article or a book that has scripture references in parentheses or the whole text printed. I tend to be more interested in what the author is saying rather than the sacred words from the Holy Bible that he or she is quoting, particularly if I’m knowledgeable of the text.

A week ago this past Friday, Steve Davis, Larry Insko, and I went to Columbus to attend a preaching seminar led by one of our favorite preachers, Fred Craddock. I could listen to Craddock lecture and preach all day long. He’s not a Baptist, but could pass for one. He’s Disciples of Christ and pastored for some years in Oklahoma and Tennessee, then taught preaching at Candler School of Theology, a Methodist seminary over at Emory University. He just retired as pastor of Cherry Log Christian Church in Cherry Log. What more could I ask for? A Disciples of Christ preacher who sounds like an historic Baptist who taught in a Methodist seminary!

His lectures were penetrating. He had four talks: Preaching and Singing, Preaching and Prayer, Preaching and The Table, and Preaching and Scripture Reading. All four grabbed me. In the last one, he noted we don’t allow enough time for the public reading of scripture in worship. Some of us have convinced ourselves that it’s more important for the people to hear the words of the sermon than the words of the ancient text. As I listened to Dr. Craddock, I began thinking about scripture. Some of us think it’s more important to skip a familiar text for one that is unknown to the human ear or forgotten with time. I remember what my college New Testament professor, William L. Lane, said often: “Read the Bible aloud and allow it to speak.” Thinking about what Dr. Lane had said and what Dr. Craddock was saying made me realize that even if I have 12 sermons on one scripture passage, I ought never be afraid to work on sermon number 13 from the same passage. Steve, Larry, and I were graced, by the way, to eat with Dr. and Mrs. Craddock during lunch. We had him and her all to ourselves.

I tell you this because I considered backing away from this text altogether this morning, which is the assigned text from the Revised Common Lectionary for this day. I gave it consideration because I’ve preached from it dozens of times in different settings. I honestly thought, “What fresh thing can I offer?” I reviewed my files and discovered that in nearly 30 years of preaching and 27 and one-half years of pastoring that I have written or outlined five sermons on the wayward son in Luke 15. I even have a recording of a sermon on this passage that was preached on Sunday, January 11, 1976 in my home church, in addition to the notes I used that day. Luke 15:11-32 served as the passage from which I preached my very first sermon as a pastor in November 1976. It was different from the one I preached earlier in the year. The other three sermons from this text are different as well. In reviewing those notes I thought, “There’s nothing else to say.”

Then it occurred to me: there's always something else to say if I'll plug into the Holy Spirit and allow Him to plug into me. I remembered what I said to myself after hearing Fred Craddock: don't be afraid to work on number 13. I committed a wrong this week by suggesting to myself there's nothing else to say. So I'm making an attempt to right that wrong, which is a purpose of you and us, by letting the text speak, as Frank Pollard did a few years ago, with a freshness and a vitality. And I want you to know that you can right the wrong you've done, perhaps, by listening for a word from God, hopefully, in these human words that I'll share, but more importantly, in the text of the sacred word.

Wrongs need to be righted, don't they? That's a purpose for you and us: righting wrongs we've done. I've always sought to approach the living of life with that attitude. If I've done something wrong and if I'm made aware of it, I'll honestly do my best to right it.

Several years ago, a teenager came forward one Sunday morning to profess his faith in Christ. I knew he was going to do that. My custom was, and still is, to have a child's parents come stand with him or her as worshippers come to offer encouragement and celebration. I asked his dad to come stand with him. As we were on our way to lunch, Jackie brought it to my attention that I had failed to have his mother come stand too. They were a model family. I felt terribly. After lunch I went to their home to apologize to her. She was hurt and angry. She had a right to be. Now she knew that I did not intentionally leave her out as if I were a male chauvinist. I had called on her to pray in church once and she did – first time a woman had ever prayed in public in that church on a Sunday morning. She knew my heart. But the reality was that I did not have her come stand with her son as well. She said and I concurred, "What's done is done and it can't be undone." But then I said, "But something else can be done." I asked her to "work with me" and she said she would. The next Sunday morning, at the conclusion of the worship hour, I had the young man, his dad, and his mom come stand at the front. I told the congregation what I had done and I needed to make right a wrong. People came by and blessed them, again. Only this time, mom was there too. From that point on, Linda was one of my strongest encouragers.

All of us have done foolish things, haven't we? It's true that when a wrong is done it is difficult to undo it. It is possible, however, to right the wrong you've done, with another doing. That's a great purpose for you and us: to right the wrong with another doing. That's what this younger son in Jesus' story did. He wasted a portion of his life in frivolity. He lost everything materially he had because of his selfishness. He had hurt his father deeply. Although he couldn't undo what he had done, he could make right the wrong he had done by doing that which was right.

In the spirit of the words you read in unison from Psalm 32, this rebellious adolescent acknowledged his sin to God and his iniquity he did not hide from Him. The young man said, in essence, "***I will confess my transgression to the Lord***"(v. 5b). He did just that according to Luke 15. He acknowledged his wrong, his sin that is, and experienced the forgiveness of his father. With the Psalmist he could literally say, "***and You forgave the guilt of my sin***" (v. 5c). That's how he made it right. He acknowledged his wrong and experienced the forgiveness of his father. That's how you and I right the wrongs that are often done. Confessing or acknowledging them is the beginning point. Then resolving to do that which is right, enables us to experience the joy of forgiveness – from God and others. This is a purpose that is Godly, indeed. We're like that younger brother, aren't we? But we're also like that older brother, too.

Is there a hint of sibling rivalry here? How about resentment? Think about this older brother. Upon learning that his contrary sibling returned and their father was throwing an all out welcome home party with eating and drinking and even dancing – had to be Baptist, don't you know! – the text says "***he became angry and was not willing to go in***" (v. 28b). Did you know that some of the angriest people are Christians? I've never been able to understand that. I realize anger is a God-given emotion and we are urged to deal with our anger. Paul expressed it well in Ephesians 4:26-27 where he said, "***Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give the devil an opportunity.***" Many

believers aren't dealing with it and are thus giving the Evil One an opportunity. Why are some Christians angry? That question can be answered, perhaps, when we see why the older brother was angry.

Why was he angry? Because he felt slighted by his father. He never went off to the distant country to live incorrectly. He hung in there with his father, working to make a difference. Day in and day out he experienced the blessing of being privileged to labor with his dad. He wasn't like his brother. But once his little brother "saw the light" as it were or as the text says, "*came to his senses*" (v. 17) he realized that people could change and anytime there is a change in somebody's life, there is reason to rejoice and celebrate. So he felt slighted. "Daddy never did anything like that for me."

Remember the opening words of Luke 15? "*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'*" (vv. 1-2). The tax collectors and sinners were the "younger brother" and the Pharisees and scribes were the "older brother" in this parable.

A purpose for you and us is to be about the task of righting the wrong we've done whenever it's displayed in the "Pharisaical Older Brother" approach to Christianity. What is that? Well, it says, "I'm better than you. I deserve preferential treatment. I know more scripture than you. My prayer life is better than yours. I do more for the Lord than you. You are such a terrible sinner that salvation could never come to you. I do deserve better." The Pharisaical approach results in anger.

Now if you're honest, there've been times in your life when you've been pharisaical. There certainly have in mine. Why I remember when Fred found Christ and asked him into his life back in 1973 in my hometown. Most of us couldn't believe it. He was as low-down as they came. He was bad news. Fred did drugs and even sold drugs on the high school campus. He never got caught. He made fun of everybody who didn't smoke pot or shoot up with something. Fred was really wasting his life. But one day in the summer of '73, he "*came to himself or his senses*" just as this unruly son did of whom Jesus spoke in Luke 15. Hardly any of us who were Christians could believe it. In fact, Fred was invited to share his testimony in some of the churches there in my hometown. I had never been invited to share my testimony in those church and I had always lived for the Lord, or so I thought. This went on for a few months. Fred kept sharing his faith. And many people – I'm ashamed to say I was one of them – kept saying, "I can't believe those churches are inviting such a terrible person to come speak." And then my pastor invited him to speak at my church.

I have to tell you that I was ticked. There was no way this guy could be saved! How dare my new pastor do this! I had been one of seven members on the Pastor Search Committee that called him straight out of seminary in March of that same year. He was just 26 years old. Who did he think he was? Then my pastor confronted me and said something like this, "Jimmy, I've observed you to be a steady, easy-going guy who isn't a fanatic about Jesus, but one who seeks to follow Him. Trust me, you're no saint, but I do think you are trying to live for Jesus. Jesus loves you so much. Do you believe Jesus loves everybody regardless?" Very proudly I said in my 16-year old piety, "Jesus loves everybody in the world and wants a relationship with everybody!" And then my pastor said, "That includes Fred, doesn't it?" Then it hit me. I was stunned. I had an overwhelming sense of conviction as I "*came to my senses*." As with Linda some years in the future, I felt badly. In fact, I cried. My pastor embraced me and held me until the sobs stopped. He said, "Jimmy, Fred needs you and he needs our youth group. He needs our church. He has Jesus, but he doesn't have us."

The wrong done against Fred couldn't be undone. But doing the right thing could right it: reaching out to Fred and welcoming him as a young brother in Christ who had come home to do the right thing himself. Even though Fred was older in age, I was the older brother.

A purpose for you and us is to be about righting the wrongs done – to the Lindas and the Freds of humanity. There are a lot of them. In fact, each of us is in that lot of people. Today we are to come to

our “*senses*” and resolve that we, individually and collectively, will no longer spend any more time in vanity and pride, caring not our Lord was crucified for all humanity – including Fred and Jimmy.

Remember dear family, the mercy at Calvary was great and the grace was free. Pardon was multiplied to you and me. Our burdened souls found liberty at Calvary. And we are to never forget that liberty was granted for all who would receive it, even the likes of a Fred or a Saddam Hussein or an Osama bin Laden. Hey, I have a better one: the likes of Jimmy Gentry.

A man had two sons. You could easily say that a man or a woman had two sons or two daughters – or a son and a daughter. The question is this. Which one are you? Don’t know? I’ll tell you. You’re just like I. You’re both. So go ahead and right the wrong you’ve done. That’s one of God’s purposes for you and us. I mean, you have done wrong, haven’t you? What’s that you say? “You don’t know for sure?” Well let me tell you. You’re just like I. You’re just like I. Oh, yes you are. Yes you are.

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All scriptures references, unless otherwise noted, are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995.