

Waiting.....

A Message for Whitehorse United Church
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Psalm 32 (Blessed are those who are forgiven)

Corinthians 5: 16-21 (Anyone in Christ is a new creation)

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32 (Prodigal son)

Let us pray - May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts bring us closer to you, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I love leading services during advent and lent – the two times of preparation and waiting in our church year. The time set aside to get ready for the two biggest events in our church life – Christmas and Easter. Advent is typically easy – we are waiting and preparing for the birth of a baby – all of us can relate to this in some way – we have waited and prepared ourselves for a baby, or we have waited alongside another. At the very least we can imagine that time of joy and fear and readying. Putting together a service involves wonderful readings, amazing music and a message of waiting for a time of joy.

Lent is a vastly different time of waiting. We are waiting for the most significant events of our Christian faith – the death and resurrection of Jesus. We know what is coming on Palm Sunday and Good Friday – the jubilation and celebration of Christ’s return to Jerusalem and the soul-wrenching scene that is played out as Christ is tortured and dies on the Cross. We wait three days knowing that the resurrection is coming. For me, putting together a service during lent is a different matter – the readings are more challenging, the music is more sombre, and the message is waiting for a time of heartbreak, introspection and finally the mystery and the gift of Easter.

Unlike past years when Bev has been away and her parting words to me have been “good luck – the reading this week have nothing to do with each other”, or “boy, you got tough ones next week”...this weeks readings have common themes and lots of great things to focus on....almost the opposite problem – be careful what you wish for – ‘cause this week I had to choose from all kinds of good stuff! Really, the parable of the prodigal son contains enough “meat” for many sermons!

But alas – I only get to give one!

As I read and prepared for today, there are two aspects of faith that jumped out at me with this weeks readings – the first is forgiveness – it is a concept that runs through all three of the readings this morning. The Psalm says “blessed are those who are forgiven”, the reading from Corinthians focuses on anyone in Christ is a new creation, and then there is the story from Luke – the parable of the prodigal son one of the ultimate stories of forgiveness. A scholar from the Church of Scotland wrote this about the parable:

The father does not try either to humour the elder son by offering him his own fatted calf, nor does he try to defend himself and lecture his elder son for his selfishness. When his pleading has no effect, he does not disagree but simply reiterates his own recognition of the younger son but with the preliminary words, 'Son, you are always with me, and what is mine is yours' (v31). The father's love has no limits, it is extended to both sons. (Very Rev Dr. Sheilagh Kesting – Church of Scotland)

A father's love has no limits. The ultimate phrase of forgiveness.

The second (and the one I want to focus on) is patience or waiting. Both forgiveness and patience for me are hallmarks of our faith. Neither can be seen – but both can be deeply felt. We know what it feels like to experience forgiveness – both giving and receiving. We have faith that we will be able to forgive when required (even when that is forgiving ourselves!).

The idea of waiting or exercising patience is one that I have a keen interest in...as anyone who knows me, knows that I have a bit of an impatient streak. When I lived in Faro, I may have had occasion to walk into the bank and if there was another person in line – say “oh, it's ok, I'll come back later!” The adage that patience is a virtue is one I struggle with – can anyone else relate? In our world of instant gratification – of email and texting.....we can get frustrated if people don't respond immediately, if, gosh forbid – the internet is slow....or goes down!

For me, the ability to wait has become one of the skills I have to work on the most. So, what does that have to do with our parable for this morning?

Well, Bev often challenges us to think about who the God character is in the parables. Or – who you might be in the story. Again, this parable has lots to think about and explore – are you an eldest child? A youngest child? A parent?

This morning I challenge us to set aside our ability to relate to the story embodied in the three men – I challenge you to think about the waiting. The waiting of all three characters –

What must the time away been like for the youngest son? Was he trying to find his way? Was he just fooling around? We are told he squanders away his inheritance in dissolute living. We can all imagine what that might have looked like! To survive he eventually takes a job tending to pigs – at that time, the job that was the lowest of the low. His time of waiting is truly a time in exile.

Then, I wonder what that time was like for the eldest son as he kept working and serving his father? Tending the land and the household...being the “good son”? He was clearly working hard, did he wish for his brother's help? Was he angry that he was working alone, or was he contented to be the son who stayed and sought favour with his father? Did he mumble under his breath with ever strike of an axe? “that darn brother of mine....probably off having a good time while I work”Did he see his life as a life of duty?

And lastly, the father. What must that time have been like? For him it wasn't probably a time of waiting so much as a time of worry and uncertainty. A child, a beloved child, and you have no idea where they are or what they are doing. Have you ever felt that? I have watched my friends put their little ones on the bus for the first time – seen the worry cross their faces as the parent wonders what is in store for that child. I can't even imagine what it is like not knowing where that youngest son was or what he was doing. That father's waiting time was probably filled with "what ifs" and worry. Was he imagining his son's return? Was he patiently waiting?

Have you ever seen the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*? The Kevin Costner iconic movie begins when an Iowa farmer hears a mysterious voice borne on the wind blowing through his cornfield, "If you build it, he will come!" The voice becomes more insistent, until Costner's character, Ray, gives in and builds a baseball diamond, complete with lights for night games and bleachers for spectators. A host of long-dead ball players come out of the night fog of the corn to play on the ball field, one asking, "Is this heaven?" To which, the farmer responds, "It's Iowa." But the real "He" who was to come is the farmer's long estranged and now dead father. In a simple game of "catch" on the field they have a chance to talk, see life from the other's point of view, and experience forgiveness and a restored relationship.

That movie exemplifies the two themes from today's readings...forgiveness and patience. Ray experiences doubters and people who mock his efforts to build the ball field – but Ray is patient. He is not sure what is going to come of it – but he trusts that he is doing the right thing. He waits....every night and in the end the whole exercise is an opportunity for forgiveness.

Here's the thing...there is a saying for those of us not so good at waiting - "Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans!" During this Lenten time of waiting and preparation – try to take a moment while you are making other plans to enjoy the waiting - to explore what it is that we are waiting for and to seek or grant forgiveness – to sit with silence and time – to just be still and wonder about the Easter to come.

Amen.