

Love at Work
Lynn Coddington
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Shepherdstown Presybyterian Church

Psalm 14

Good morning. When you're invited to give a reflection on Sunday morning the invitation comes with this helpful information:

"See if you connect with one (of the passages) in a particular way. Is there a word or image or storyline that really stands out for you? Something that attracts you?

Or, perhaps, something that you find really hard or annoying? That's probably the one you'll want to continue working with!"

To that last point, I will tell you that I'm thoroughly annoyed with myself for picking Psalm 14.

Here's what the Psalm says:

"Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.

The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.

They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.

Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the LORD?

There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the company of the righteous.

You would confound the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.

O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad."

That's the end of the Psalm.

I had to find a lot of help from reading many sources to try to understand how to connect to this Psalm.

According to some theologians, the "Fools who say in their hearts, "There is no God,"" are actually atheists hiding out in the church itself. They're people who live as though there is no God, Christians in name, but pagans in practice.

At least one scholar thinks the Psalm is directed against those in Israel who thought they could live without any moral restraint because they thought God was essentially irrelevant. With God on the sidelines, he says, atheists within the church were free to oppress the poor and the needy and to amass wealth through whatever means possible.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann concludes, "When the Creator is not honored, creaturely life disintegrates and degenerates. The end result is a life filled with terror. There are no guards, limits, or boundaries, but everything is continually at risk."

So this Psalm is all about the breakdown of moral order . . . both then and now.

For me . . . the Psalm is a mirror on the world we're living in.

There are vulnerable people all around us living without shelter or enough food.

There are frightened immigrants and asylum seekers begging for safety in our country but being turned away by the Supreme Court. There are those addicted to drugs that were poured out on them by big Pharma itself.

There is ample evidence of what to expect from decades of exploiting our land – melting ice caps, rising sea levels, immense storms, islands blasted away, and about to be blasted again, people adrift and hopeless.

Isn't this ample evidence that there are people in control today who believe that they can do what they want, that they owe nothing to each other or to a higher power.

"There is no one who does good. Not one"

No one, really? Does that mean ME TOO? Could I be a Christian in name but a pagan in my heart? Is there any sign of encouragement or hope of grace in this lament? Is there a way out of the immoral morass? There are hints.

". . . for God is present in the company of the righteous," says the Psalm.

". . . righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . ." (Romans 3).

I found a way to think about all of this by reading something from Jim Wallis in *Sojourners*, the progressive magazine of that social justice group.

Writing about his new book, *Christ in Crisis, Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*, Wallis reflects on our modern version of the moral disorder found in Psalm 14. He talks about President Abraham Lincoln who appealed to "the better angels of our nature." That's what our political and religious leaders should always do . . . appeal to our best angels, Wallis says.

But at the other end of the moral spectrum, he points out that there are political and especially some religious leaders who are appealing to our worst demons such as fear and anger, greed, resentment and prejudice, and hatred.

The central message of his book is that Christians have become disconnected from Jesus, and that it's time to re-engage. "Are there fundamental truths of Jesus' ministry that can help us find our way back to him, even and especially amid this fearful moment, he wonders?"

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked a similar question in early 1930s Nazi Germany: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"

So now I think get it. Re-engaging in the life and meaning of Jesus and how he lived among all who were oppressed preaching a message of hope is a way forward.

"... for God is present in the company of the righteous."k

One of Richard Rohr's recent daily meditations was about Carl Jung. Jung, Rohr says, felt that Christianity contributes to a discontinuity between God and the soul by over-emphasizing external rituals and intellectual belief rather than inner experience and inner transformation.

For Jung, the God archetype is the inner energy within the soul of all things, saying, "Become who you are. Become *all* that you are. There is still more of you — more to be discovered, forgiven, and loved."

The God archetype is simply *love at work* calling us toward ever deeper union with our own True Self, with others, and with God.

Late in his life, when asked if he "believed" in God, Jung said, "I could not say I believe. I know! I have had the experience of being gripped by something that is stronger than myself, something that people call God."

And this is something I knew years ago as a kid – sitting silently in the sanctuary of my church – when something unknown filled me up. I felt deeply then that it must be God.

And I still believe that.

Amen.

The Long Walk Home

Lonce H. Bailey

A Reflection on the story of the Prodigal Son,

September 15th, 2019

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Luke Chapter 15

It's always a blessing to be in front of everyone at SPC and this chance to reflect on the readings is extra special because I am usually told I can only talk to the kids! But I am also blessed because Lynn, who gave a lovely reflection, agreed to take on the Book of Psalms and she left for me Luke and the story of the Prodigal Son. So thank you Lynn for that huge softball!

Indeed, the Story of the Prodigal Son as offered by Luke is one of the most profound stories of the bible. In many ways it holds several core truths of the Christian faith. And in that way, and in the way it is structured, it is also prolific. It has many revelations, many truths, many views, many stories. It makes for a very deep and healing passage to reflect on and share my thoughts with others.

You have all heard the story. A father has two sons who stand to inherit his wealth and property. The younger son, in what is a pretty shocking request (especially given the time and culture) asks for his half of the inheritance now so that he may make his way in life. And his father obliges him. The son takes his share and heads to another land where he proceeds to squander the money and then, on top of that, the country he is in slides into famine. He barely stays alive by feeding pigs on a farm where he wishes he could have the pig's food. Meanwhile, back at the homestead, the older son is obedient, works hard, and cares for the father and his farm. The younger son, at the end of his rope, decides it would be better for him to be a servant at his father's place than live in the state he is in and decides to go back home to his father, beg for forgiveness, and ask for a job as one of his servants. So, with that plan roughed out he heads home -- a long, long walk home. His father, seeing him coming from the distance runs to greet him and pours love all over him before the son could even get a word out. Gives him robes,

holds a feast, kills the fatted calf, the whole shebang. The older son, as you can imagine, is rather miffed by it all and protests to his father. The father tells him, you are always with me and all that I have is yours, he was lost but now he is found, he was dead but now he is alive.

Honestly, we can see ourselves in any of these three roles. What would you do if you were the father or mother, what would you do if you were crawling back home, how would you see the situation if you were the older devout son. All these roles have meant different things to me at different times in my life. It's one of the reasons the story is so beautiful and full of truth.

They are all compelling parts of the story but the Father is clearly the lynchpin, the sons and their actions only come fully to light, their story is only complete with the Father's interaction and reaction to them. And I want to get to the Father's reaction in a second, but the thing that really grabbed me over the last few weeks was the prodigal son and, more specifically, about the prodigal son's long, long walk home.

That walk, there is something about that walk that I could identify with and sympathize with. What was that walk like for him. He had it in his mind what he was going to say, how he was going to beg for forgiveness, how he was going to ask for only a servant's role. He had his plan roughed out in his mind and he had a long walk home to figure exactly how the pitch was going to go.

I think it is fair to say we have all taken this walk. Certainly in concrete literal ways -- we have had to go to our friends, loved ones, family members to apologize, to admit our failures, to deliver heart-breaking news that we feel responsible for. We think of all the ways we can say it, all the ways that might assure acceptance, love, or forgiveness.

In a less literal way we take these walks all the time. Have you ever felt that you are not truly worthy of love? Had guilt over your own actions towards yourself, or toward God, or toward humanity. Guilt over perceived personal failures, shortcomings, and unfilled potential. Many of us go through times when we feel unworthy or undeserving. That, even if we have not let other people down directly, we have let ourselves down, that we are not worthy of admiration or respect or love -- especially God's love.

That is the walk of this lost son. I know that walk well, have done it many times. It is painful and it is a trip I have taken more than I care to admit. And that is true of many of us. I would imagine on any given day you cross paths with many people on that walk, or contemplating the walk, in any number of small or big ways. And I have had family, friends, and loved ones take that walk toward me, I know what it looks like from the father's view.

Henri Nouwen, the writer and theologian, wrote an entire book on this story. And he could identify with this walk.

"I still live as though the God to whom I am returning demands an explanation. I still think about his love as *conditional* and about home as a place I am not yet fully sure of. While walking home, I keep entertaining doubts about whether I will be truly welcome when I get there. As I look at my spiritual journey, my long and fatiguing trip home, I see how full it is of guilt about the past and worries about the future. I realize my failures and know that I have lost the dignity of my sonship, but I am not yet able to fully believe that where my failings are great, 'grace is always greater.' Still clinging to my sense of worthlessness, I project for myself a place far below that which belongs to the son, (p. 52)."

But where does that leave us. That walk is a doozy, but what we *learn* from it goes back to the lynchpin of the story -- the father.

What is the reaction of the Father? Before the son could even get even one word of his well rehearsed speech out, the father sees him from afar and runs to him and showers him with love. He doesn't even say a word but his father has already answered him.

And even when the father hears his apologies, he does not respond.... He embraces him in every way that is important -- he is full and totally accepted as his son, the party starts, love flows freely and without restraint. All that worrying and rehearsing on that long walk and it washes away before he could say a word. The love and acceptance is total and complete, the love and forgiveness was anticipatory , it existed before he could make his case.

Anticipatory love, what a wonderful concept.

So we learn from the prodigal that the long walk home, all that shame and guilt, exists because we doubt that we can be forgiven and embraced. We doubt God's love. We have forgotten that God's love existed before us and will exist after us. God's love is large and sloppy and overwhelming. It knows no normal, rational bounds.

And we can learn quite a bit from the reunion of father and son. At its heart it shows a non-transactional form of love. It requires no give and take, it requires no contract. It requires offering and accepting. And neither side of that is easy, but that is what God is calling us to do. To love unconditionally, and to accept this love with abandon. Its a call to embrace others, whoever they are, whomever they love, whatever their identity, whatever their situation in life . Its a call to embrace those who are on that long walk.

The religious writer, speaker, and pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber would describe this story from Luke as the "Prodigal Father." Prodigal, as she points out, is definitionally the act of spending freely, wastefully, extravagantly. In this story, the Father is prodigious with his love. As she says:

"Isn't it wastefully extravagant for the Father to give his children so much freedom? Isn't it wastefully extravagant for the Father to discard his dignity and run into the street toward a foolish and immature son who squandered their fortune? Isn't it wastefully extravagant for the father to throw such a raging party for this kind of wayward son?"

But, see, I love that kind of grace." She concludes

This story, in my mind, is a call to love and accept others like that -- to love prodigiously, to forgive recklessly, to embrace with abandon. Anticipate others long walk and embrace them and forgive them even when it doesn't make sense.

Henry Nouwen reinforces this: "*I now see that the hands that forgive, console, heal, and offer a festive meal must become my own.*" — **Henri J.M. Nouwen**, *Return of the Prodigal Son*.

But in our desire to try to live up to these high standards, the question is how? Especially, how do we, as the prodigal, learn to accept this kind of love.

Many years ago I remember spending a long afternoon having drinks and talking with a close friend of mine who was also a priest and spiritual counselor of mine. We had many long talks, but we were talking about forgiveness. In particular forgiving oneself. And I had this very

question. "How". And he said simple, "just turn around. It is right there. The love, the forgiveness, it's right there. You simply need to turn around and see it. Accept it." Sort of a long winded "Just do it."

What my friend was describing and what the story from Luke points to is the "intimacy of God's love and forgiveness." The intimacy of love and forgiveness in general. It is close and personal and truly intertwined. It is the intimacy we share as children of God.

There is no space between the Father and Son, there is no space between you and God, and there need not be any space between you and those friends and loved ones and fellow brothers and sisters. When we realize it is all intimate, it becomes clear and effortless. Just turn around.

John Rohr, because no SPC talk is complete unless we reference him, explains this intimacy in several of his writings, including the one we are reading this fall. He refers to God as everywhere and in everything. He uses words like ubiquitous and eternal. He sees it as intimate. Close.

He goes on in one reflection, "goodness is a beautiful human concept that includes every part of us and all of us." and then quotes Colossians "There is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything."

So, if it is that close, that intimate and immediate. You only have one thing you need to do, turn around and see it. Turn around and be it. And if you are in the position of the father (the prodigal father) you only have one thing you need to do, anticipate with love, forgiveness, and understanding. It's right there in front of you, in you, and in the other. Be the prodigal friend, the prodigal spouse, the prodigal parent.

And if you are lost, and are on that long walk, remember to simply turn around -- the love is already there. Turn that walk of guilt and shame into a walk of light.