

Lent 4C. March 6, 2016. Luke 15:1-3,11b-32.

If my calculations are correct, then we should be getting just about to the time in the liturgical calendar when we realize that we are failing Lent. It reminds me of page six in the instruction booklet for putting together a piece of furniture from Ikea. On the first few pages, you're following the stupid little drawings and connecting a long piece to a round piece and you have no idea what they have to do with the larger whole, but it's what the drawing depicted and there are still plenty of screws left and probably this long piece is a leg to a chair, eventually. And by page five you've got several separate components put together pretty well. Probably the four legs, something that might be a cross-piece of some kind. And then you get to page six, when you start attaching these pieces to each other. And that's when you realize, whatever you've put together so far is never going to come together into an armchair.

Well, that's about where we are in Lent. We started off great, with all the components of a holy forty days. We were coming to church every week, we were praying everyday, we were drinking less and skipping dessert and really trying to be kind to everyone. But then we missed some services for very good reasons, we were praying three days a week, we started skipping dessert every other day, only drinking on days when we saw a friend, and we're still managing to be kind to everyone except Uncle Toby who supports that candidate and fills up our Facebook page with the most vile political rhetoric and he knows my views and really he had it coming. We've reached page six, when our disciplines have become so ragged that they aren't really recognizable as disciplines anymore, and we realize that three weeks from now we're not going to be any different from how we were three weeks ago.

And that's when we get this classic story of repentance: the prodigal son, who rejected his father and wasted all his resources and eventually hit rock bottom and there "came to himself," and went back home fully aware of his wretchedness, begging not even for love, but just for some work and bread. It is a classic tale of repentance, but it is gospel for us today, on page six of the instruction booklet, because it is also a tale of imperfect repentance.

This story is gospel for us today as we realize that we are failing Lent because it is a story about what happens when you fail at one of the key themes of Lent: repentance. The crucial point in the prodigal's repentance is not when he goes back home, hat in hand if he hadn't already pawned it, but the moment in the pigsty when he comes to himself. Long-time parishioners will have heard that one meaning of repentance is to "come to your senses." A related meaning is just this: to come to yourself, to remember who you were created to be and to force yourself to take a long hard truly honest look at the person you really are right now.

We do a lot of calling ourselves to repentance during Lent. You may have noticed that when we are doing what is called a penitential order in our liturgy, the very first thing we do is remind ourselves of who we all were created to be: people who love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves. And then we immediately confess that, well, we're not those people. Remembering and confessing are essential elements in a true repentance. And the thing is, for all his influence on our imaginations about what it means to repent, the prodigal son doesn't really do this very well.

Yes, he comes to himself and he confesses his sin to his father. And I imagine that that was very difficult to do. But here's what I mean by an imperfect repentance. When he comes back to his parent, he doesn't really come as himself, as a child to this particular parent. He comes back proposing a deal. He comes back proposing a deal that explicitly involves him being accepted as something other than what he really is: as a hired hand, rather than a child. And the flip side of this deal is that he proposes that his dad act like something other than what he is: that he be an employer, rather than a father. Any repentance is imperfect if it is based on our relationship with God and each other being based on anything other than radical, uncompromising, unconditional love. God's love for us, as the folks we were created to be, not the folks we have constructed to impress ourselves, other people, or even to impress God.

But here's the thing about this imperfect repentance: it doesn't get the prodigal son what he wants (which is just to be an employee), but it still works. We are all the time proposing deals to God. Sometimes it's explicit: God, if you'll just get me out of this mess, then I promise I'll do whatever. I for one am a very well-practiced but still generally unsuccessful negotiator with God in this sense. But more often it is implicit and much more pervasive: we model our whole spiritual lives along the lines of a deal. Each liturgy attended, each prayer thought, each cruelty declined, we think of as a credit in our bank. The story of the prodigal son, though, is a story about a God who no longer makes deals.

We are left, then, with the need to come to terms with the wild, imprudent, profligate love of God. The God who interrupts our negotiations with an embrace and responds to our proposals with an invitation to a party. So what does this have to do with failing Lent? Well, first it's a diagnosis. There's really quite a good chance that we have planned out our Lent as if we were dealing with a God who put requirements on the distribution of grace. There is really a very good chance that we have set ourselves goals that would make us into employees, rather than cherished daughters and sons. And that's probably the reason why we're failing Lent.

And then there's very good news: failing Lent, repenting imperfectly, is no impediment to the grace of God. It flows unfailingly and constantly. When we show up, not even repenting correctly, God will remind us of who we were created to be, and not with judgment and punishment, but with invitations and an embrace. So if you, like me, are realizing with half of Lent gone by that your Lenten disciplines have gone the way of your New Year's resolutions, take heart. And take this week as a chance to refocus, to repent anew. To remember who you were really created to be. And most importantly, to remember the wonderful truth about the God who is always running out to meet us.