

The Passion of the Prodigal Son
4 Lent C
“I am no longer worthy to be called your son”

The prodigal son wasted his life. He was self-indulgent and a degenerate. It is sad when a young person wastes his or her life. It has happened to people we know and love. I was a prodigal that once threw away a college education. The word “prodigal” also means a person who is reckless, extravagant, dissolute, and uncontrolled. Thank God for places like Lazarus House and Living Waters where shipwrecked lives can have another chance. Blessed are they who resist being labeled or diagnosed for they are worthy to be called children of God.

In the story of the prodigal a young man sees fit to ask for his inheritance early. There is nothing wrong with that in Jewish tradition. Both the younger and the older sons get their due. Herein lays the fork in the road. One son is stable and reliable. He remains at home working the farm along with his father. He’s a good boy. He doesn’t buck the system. In fact when his younger brother returns he’s found working the field. The older son is a father’s dream. Yet the older son himself does NOT dream very much. He goes along with the plan laid out for him. It seems as if he is asleep and does not venture much. Until his younger brother returns he does not realize he has not lived very much. He is too careful with his inheritance. Nothing ventured and not much gained.

Then there is Junior! It seems like he is the favorite. He gets to squander his inheritance. Incidentally, nothing in the parable suggests he gets anything more. He’s finished! He has sown his wild oats and he has nothing to show for it. His life is worthless as far as his financial portfolio and he is dead to his father. No one takes pity on him as they watch him eat pig pods. Oink! Oink! Oy vay!

Yet Junior has what is called a spiritual awakening. A spiritual awakening is what happens when you are at the bottom of your life and there is no place lower to go. And one day divine inspiration occurs.

Bill Wilson, once a successful Wall Street investor in the 1930’s, found himself down on his luck, flat on his back in a New York City hospital dying of liver disease. He felt his life literally seeping out of him when he noticed a strange soft light entering his room that bathed him in its warmth. From then on he had an overwhelming

sense that everything was “right with God and the world.” The co-founder of AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, was a prodigal who had a spiritual awakening.

These prodigals found not only inspiration but they found passion for living. In the passion of life both prodigals found new life, new passion and they were welcomed into the arms of a loving Father. They who were once unworthy found acceptance and peace and could celebrate life again.

Brothers and sisters if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new! Every Sunday, every time there is a service of worship we speak of this newness as the Good News of Jesus Christ. God has rolled away our disgrace as he did in Gilgal. God has made us worthy in Christ.

It recently dawned on me that the Good News of Jesus Christ is also the Good News about his people wherever they worship him. Their lives are Good News to those who feel unworthy, to those whose passion for living is seeping out from them. God’s people are the Good News of Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus Christ only becomes Good News when we his people become the Good News like the prodigals also became.

So I took a question to several people around Janesville this past week who attend different churches in Janesville. I only asked lay people this question: “What for you is the Good News about your church?” Here are some of the answers I received: One member of a Lutheran church said it was their youth program and youth ministers. A member of a Presbyterian church said it was their Bible study groups which gets people together for discussion. Another different Presbyterian Church member said it was their Women of Faith group which minister in every facet of their church’s life (not just hospitality and altar guild). Another Lutheran member said about her church, “The warm welcoming atmosphere that makes me feel like I belong there.” A United Church of Christ member said, “It’s the God is Still Speaking program running in all UCC churches whose message is that anyone is welcome at our church.” Are these answers encouraging? These people seemed to be excited about their parishes and from their tone of voice it said to me that they had a passion for ministry in their church. By answering this simple question they proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ.

My sermon today is not complete without asking you this same question. I ask you to proclaim with me the Good News of Jesus Christ by simply asking each other this same question right now in these last five minutes of my sermon. I ask you in Jesus name (not in my name) to stand up, get out of your pew if necessary, and ask the person in front of you, in back of you and across from you, "What for you is the Good News about your church?" (PAUSE)

What for you is the Good News about your church? It's about you and me. It's about US! Amen.