

Call to Worship:

Psalm 32 (modified, lectionary)

One: *Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom Adonai imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

All: **While we kept silence, our body wasted away through our groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon us; our strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then we acknowledged our sin to You, and we did not hide our iniquity; we said, "I will confess my transgressions to Adonai," and You forgave the guilt of our sin.**

One: *Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to You; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.*

All: **You are a hiding place for us; You preserve us from trouble; You surround us with glad cries of deliverance.**

One: *We will be instructed and taught the way we should go; we will be counseled with a divine eye upon us.*

All: **Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near us.**

One: *Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in Adonai.*

All: **Be glad in Adonai and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all of you upright in heart.**

Readings:

Joshua 5:9-12 (lectionary)

Adonai said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt."

And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Matthew 15:21-28 (non-lectionary)

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

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

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So the father divided his property between them.

"A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father.

"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then the elder son became angry and refused to go in.

"His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

"Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Sermon: "Founding Church"

Soon after the publication of one of his most seminal works – *Moral Man and Immoral Society* – the ethicist and UCC pastor Reinhold Niebuhr asked his brother H. Richard Niebuhr what he thought of his new book. H. Richard replied that it was fine but it didn't go far enough. When Reinhold asked what he meant by this, H. Richard clarified: they were both very close brothers from a tight-knit German Reformed family in central Illinois; they agreed on many things both religiously and socially; they would eventually both teach on the east coast (H. Richard at Yale University and Reinhold at Union Theological Seminary in New York); and they would arguably become the two most influential Christian theologians in the U.S. in the early 20th century. Yet, despite their love for each other, H. Richard clarified, there was sin even between them. H. Richard confessed that he envied Reinhold because between the two of them Reinhold was the more well-known: he wrote the famed "serenity prayer" and although they could not have known it at the time Reinhold's influence would only increase when he supervised Martin Luther King, Jr.'s doctoral studies and later, even after, death Reinhold's influence is obvious in the thought of President Barak Obama. However Reinhold, H. Richard further clarified back then, undoubtedly couldn't help but be jealous of him, H. Richard, because Reinhold had to admit in his heart of hearts that between the two them it was H. Richard who was the better theologian. "You're right," Reinhold replied, "maybe I should have titled my book 'Immoral Man and Immoral Society'."¹

Our Lenten readings this morning take us to those deep crevices of the heart, burrowing down not only into each of us as we reflect critically this season on our personally lives and how we all participate in systemic sin but also into the heart of the matter of our relational lives in the wider world, in the Chicago community, and in this congregation as an intentional community of faith, grace, hope, and justice. Specifically, our lectionary gospel reading from Luke addresses this through the parable to two other brothers. This Lucan passage picks up on the ancient biblical motif of the tension between a younger and an older sibling, be it Abel and Cain, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and even Joseph and his older brothers. In each of these sets we are told that there is something ruddy or crude about the older siblings and something better regarding the younger one that warrants favoritism. In this respect, we can expand this "older vs. younger siblings" motif to include other pairs like David and Goliath. This symbolic motif of sibling rivalry, therefore, serves as a microscopic lens not so much on nuclear family dynamics but rather on tensions within the wider human family, namely between those who migrate and settle and those who are already there, immigrants vs. current residents, first-comers vs. later-arrivals.

Ironically, our first reading this morning from the Hebrew scriptures allows us to understand this a bit more clearly. It is ironic because this passage from Joshua is seemingly one of the more joyous moments in biblical history as it concludes the story of the Exodus journey. God, as the Creator and Highest Being, has already heard the cry of God's people as slaves in Egypt and has shown us that God is also the Liberator. For unjust reasons the Hebrews were oppressed, discriminated against, and enslaved into poverty for centuries by the Egyptian wealthy. In these books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua we can understand God not only as the God who loves everyone and everything, as is evident in Genesis with Adam and Eve and later with Noah, but is also the God who is on the side of the most disenfranchised and who announces a correction, a plan of not retributive justice or vengeance but rather restorative justice that in the end will eliminate all suffering and its causes. This Exodus story has empowered many people to carry out their own

¹ Relayed by Prof. Franklin Gamwell, unsure of where else can be cited.

acts of reconciliation, community-based peace, and social justice that show the Reign of God not only in the "next life" or in the "end times" but also within actual human history.

However, there is an ugly side of this beautiful story and it is the part that we have heard today. After being liberated, the tribes of Israel marched to another land to conquer it. They joyously eat no longer the manna from heaven but the new fruits of the land into which they have just arrived. While it sounds triumphant, these are not their crops. They did not plant them. This is Canaan, and what is being devoured is the result of the labor and love of Canaanites, not Israelites. And while we may refer to these scriptures as the "word of God" we should be mindful that they were not written by God but rather by members of this Hebrew people; this is to say that like the majority of histories, this history in particular was also written by the victors. We don't have accounts by tribes conquered by the Israelites; we don't have the histories of the Canaanites in the Bible.² Possibly the lack of Canaanite evidence is the result of having been taken over and loosing their houses, urban centers, natural resources, native culture, and, even more sinister, their stories.

This story is a case in which a people oppressed by one group changes to be the oppressor of another group. This story can serve as a warning. But of the history within and from Europe it is obvious that these verses did not serve as a warning to believers but rather was manipulated to justify the violence by Europeans and their descendents toward other peoples around the world. In the Americas, including the U.S., Bible verses such as these have been used by non-indigenous peoples to justify not only the intended ethnocide of the past "500 years" but also the racism that continues in the U.S., Guatemala, and unfortunately many other places. For this reason various members of the indigenous peoples in the Americas and elsewhere are critical of Christianity. And on one hand, as indicated truly through recent history and the abuse of the word of God to justify such acts, these critics are right.

However, on the other hand, the history of God in human history doesn't end with this reading from Joshua. Jace Weaver is a Methodist theologian and enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation and he responds to these critics with the second reading that we've also just heard.³ In this second reading from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus as a man of Israel meets an indigenous elderly woman, a Canaanite woman. In the beginning Jesus takes the posture of the rest of Israel as his disciples did and other Israelites have done for centuries since the arrival of Joshua into the land. Within the New Testament, the majority of these indigenous peoples are invisible. They existed but we don't read anything about them. They are almost forgotten, without names, like objects of the past. But this elderly woman struggles, confronting Jesus with her request and the only argument that Jesus will ever lose.

² This is not to say that narratives from ancient Canaanites do not exist (see, for example, Michael David Coogan, ed. and trans., *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Westminster Press, 1978)) but rather that their account of these same events in particular are absent.

³ Jace Weaver and William Baldrige, responses to Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, James Treat, ed. (New York, New York: Routledge, 1996), 93-104. For other Native American liberation theologians and critics see: George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1993) and *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008); Roy I. Wilson, *A Native American Liberation Theology: Healing for Both the Oppressed and the Oppressor* (Bremerton, Washington: Roy I. Wilson Publisher, 1996); and Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1969) and *God is Red* (New York, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973).

In this second reading that Jace Weaver suggests to us Jesus assumed the racist posture of the Israelites toward the Canaanites and, in the end, showed how it was a serious grievance. In this way Jesus gave an example of how to transform a posture of an oppression to be one of solidarity. Like Abraham bartering with God to change God's mind, Jesus allows a Canaanite woman to change his position. This is a clear denunciation by Jesus of racism and the harm and suffering it does to all but worst of all to those without resources, without access to medical care, without much family. In this passage it is this nameless cultural and religious stranger that had the wisdom absent in many others, including the disciples, as she understood who Jesus was and she didn't wait praying and simply struggling for her "daily bread." Jesus answers in a restorative and just way to the violence that happened to the Canaanites in the wake of the Exodus, and he began a process of being ready to change his posture and position and of being open to listening to the wisdom of others. In this way Jesus and the woman together began a process of reconciliation, in this particular case the reconciliation of the various human tribes, immigrant and indigenous.

Such wise women and men still speak to us today even outside of the scriptures. Ironically for us (current residents of this land) such words of the Americas' first residents come from those we consider "immigrants" or "off the reservation." In her own account as an indigenous woman made to feel like a stranger in her homeland the noble laureate and Native American activist Rigoberta Menchú wrote of her childhood in Guatemala:

When we left the [coffee plantation], the landowner's guards travelled behind... And they were armed. ...So we reached the capital. I remember that my cloths were worn out because I'd been working in the [plantation]: my [skirt] was really dirty and my [blouse] very old. ...I didn't have any shoes. The master's wife [for whom I was to work as a maid] was at home. The first night, I remember, I didn't know what to do. ...Then later the mistress called me. The food they gave me was a few beans with some very hard tortillas. There was dog in the house, a pretty, white, fat dog. When I saw the [other] maid bring out the dog's food – bits of meat, rice, things that the family ate – and they gave me a few beans and hard tortillas, that hurt me very much. The dog had a good meal and I didn't deserve as good a meal as the dog. Anyway, I ate it, I was used to it. I didn't mind not having the dog's food because at home I only ate tortillas with chile or with salt or water. But I felt rejected. I was lower than the animals in the house.⁴

In many respects these words echo not only those of the Canaanite woman to Jesus 2,000 years ago or those of other present day Native American leaders but also those of the younger brother in our third reading this morning. In many respects the path toward resolution between the peoples of the Bible offered in this joint reading from Joshua and the second gospel is precisely the type of correction that Jesus aims for and encapsulates in this parable from Luke 15. The central message of this parable focuses on the basis or foundation of a just and inclusive community, a reconciling community, double entendre intended—a community that is reconciling among itself and helps to reconcile with others.⁵ This requires not just grace but also a lot of work.

This parable, like the other two that preceded it of the lost sheep and the lost coin, is unique to the gospel of Luke and appears nowhere else in the scriptures. As a set, these three parables have Jesus tell of the profound sense of anxiety felt with a loss of a beloved and the profound sense of jubilation felt once the beloved is found. All three of these stories that Jesus tells his mixed crowd of self-righteous Pharisees and self-acknowledged sinners deals with losing, seeking, and finding.

⁴ Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, ed., *Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Ann Wright, trans. (New York, New York and London, Great Britain: Verso, 2009 [1984]), 108-109.

⁵ Samuel Oyin Abogunrin, "Luke," *The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, William R. Farmer, ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 1415-1416.

However, this third parable, often mistakenly called the "prodigal son" gives a unique perspective. As this story's central character is not the youngest son but rather the patient parent, this parable addresses not the loss and finding of an object but rather the loss, finding, and transformation of relationships.⁶ Furthermore, it actually addresses not only the loss, finding, and transformed relationship between the community and the younger sibling but also, in the end, of that of the older sibling as well.

This parable actually draws our attention to three transformations or moments of reconciliation. The first, which is more implicit than explicit, is the unmentioned transformation that occurred earlier in the younger sibling. As often happens with latter groups or generations there is an appropriation of the previous groups' stories and histories, some freely taught, shared, and given, but often also stolen.

This is what happens, for example, when New England colonists dress like Native Americans to attack British ships in the Boston Tea Party of 1700s; when Zionists say that they were "a people without a land" and Palestine "was a land without a people" as they then use the Hebrew Bible as land deed; or German nationalists co-opt Celtic and Viking legends to justify why Central European Jews are really "foreigners"; when early Christians soon after Jesus took the Hebrew scriptures away from the Jews and called it the "Old Testament"; when more recent immigrants like Asian Americans are pressured to be the "model minorities" in realizing the "American Dream"; or when we today still study the history of the U.S. from northeast to the south and then west forgetting that the first "thanksgiving" took place not in Plymouth but rather El Paso three decades before, that the oldest town in the U.S. is not Jamestown but rather Saint Augustine (or San Agustín), Florida, that the oldest capital city in the U.S. is Santa Fe, New Mexico, and that there are many peoples who did not cross the border but rather the borders have crossed them. In all of these cases, just as what the Israelites did the Canaanites, the stories of who is "native" are suppressed, denied, or appropriated by those who arrive later.

On one hand there is a tension between those who arrived earlier to a place, to a community, to a congregation who argue from a sentiment of first-come-first-serve and those who arrive later who argue from a sentiment of might-makes-right. However, on the other hand a reversal often happens as the later arrivals use their might to appropriate the stories needed to make them sound like they are the rightful inhabitants and thus the true "natives" thereby making both any previous residents as well as subsequent arrivals into "foreigners," "aliens," "immigrants," and "illegals." The younger brother in this parable states that he deserves what he feels is his rightful due immediately before anyone else and before his father even dies. What he feels is right comes at the expense of any relationships in the community, and as we soon see he and the community all suffer this loss.

The second transformation comes in the wake of this loss and after this younger brother is made to feel like a stranger, as strange as a Jew who must resort to feeding pigs owned by a gentile. It is only in this encounter with and dependency upon a stranger of another culture and religion that the younger brother gains a new perspective on his life and right relationships, the type of perspective that we are all called to acquire as we examine our own lives and sins critically during a season like Lent and during a transition period in the life a congregation searching for new pastor. It

⁶ Fred Craddock, "Luke," *The Harper-Collins Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, ed. (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2000), 946.

is only as a result of such deep and sometimes disturbing soul-searching that the younger sibling finds himself or, as this gospel passage says, "comes to himself."

It is only after such a person, community, or congregation finds itself and is reconciled with itself as to who or what one ought to be that the third transformation is possible, a reconciliation with others in wider community. The renewed, restored relationship between the younger child and the parent in this parable is not the same as when the younger child violated relationship in the beginning. This isn't to say that adults are always the patient and graceful ones and that youth and young adults don't often rise to the challenge to be the "adults" in relationships with their elders. On the contrary, this is often far too common when it is the older generations that act like the younger brother in this parable and prefer to be "right" rather than in righteous relationship. With the return and reconciliation of the estranged the whole community is able to be restored, it finds in transformed and more fulfilled relationships what was once lost and much more. These moves of gracious or grace-filled justice not only restore the community but are the new foundation for the new type of community, the beloved community that the church is called by Jesus to be and do. As church, congregations are called to exemplify such grace and to practice such restorative justice to close the gap between "what is" and "what ought to be."

However, the finding of both the alienated and the re-establishing or re-founding of community is not the end of the story. As much as we would like to place ourselves in this parable as the gracious parent or sing "Amazing Grace" and identify with the younger sibling Jesus places us, instead, in the end with the older sibling. The older sibling remains only partially reflective, thinking that he rather than anyone else has it right and therefore demands what is right at the expense of either relationship with others such as the younger sibling or even, now, the father. Our parable ends with Jesus leaving open before his mixed audience in Luke, and now before us, as to what this child will do. Will such a child recognize what she or he has done to erect barriers or inflict wounds upon those with whom she or he is called to be in relationship while simultaneously, hypocritically, and thus sinfully proclaiming to be "close to the father" – the patient parent – and claiming to be contributing constructively to an intentional community of faith, grace, hope, and justice? Jesus ends this parable asking what will this sibling be and do? And there, turning the question upon us: what will we, University Church, be and do?

I hope and I pray that during this Lenten season, this time of continued self-study and transition, this time of seeking, that we as a congregation never find what we believe what we are called to be and do. On contrary, rather than finding it, I hope and I pray that we, as an intentional community of faith, grace, hope, and justice may always together be founding it. *Amén*.

Benediction (given by tat Virgilio Vicente):

*Jun pixab',
ri ati't mam kakib'ij chike ri ekalk'wal:
"Kiwil na ri man qilom taj,
Kita na ri man qatom taj."*

K'iche' Maya counsel,
that grandparents give to their grandchildren:
"You all shall see what we have not seen,
you all shall hear, what we have not heard."