

June 12

Admitting Mistakes

Luke 15:11-32

Last week we found out how easy it is for us to end up in a far off country. The steps that take us there are small but the cumulative effect is that we end up in a place we never intended to be. The young man thought about parties and girls and ended up feeding pigs and eyeing the pigs' slop with envy because he was so hungry. Now his case is an extreme one yet we all have dealt with times where we know we are in a place God would not wish us to be. We are sitting in a field of anger. We are lounging beside a pool of un-forgiveness. We are perched on a chair of spite. We have, in our own way, left home. We are, if not in a far off country, at least down the lane and possibly heading out of town in a hurry. How do we turn around? This is the literal meaning of repentance. It means to turn and go the other direction.

The parable says a brief phrase, "He comes to himself" but those words are filled with meaning. We all need, at times, to have those moments when we come to ourselves. Part of what that means is that you are finally willing to admit that where you are and what you are doing is not ok. This wasn't difficult for the man in the story. He had sunk so low that he was in a pigsty ravenously hungry. For a Jew, to have to tend pigs, well that is about as low as you can get. Fighting them for the slop to stay alive means things are really bad. At a time such as this it is pretty easy to come to yourself and realize that this was not what you planned. Home, that place you couldn't wait to get away from, now looks pretty wonderful. You know that the grass isn't greener on the other side of the fence. But, I ask, "Why did it take this long for him to come to himself?" When he got to that far off city which was so different, proclaiming values and lifestyles that were the opposite of home, why didn't he pause then?

I believe it is because one of the things that has to happen for you to come to yourself is that you have to be willing to confess to the mistakes that got you there. In the beginning he knew what he was doing was wrong but he didn't want to admit that his decision to leave home was a bad thing. He didn't want to admit that dad, "God"

knew best. So he kept getting in deeper and deeper until we find him tending pigs. God always desires that we come to ourselves sooner than later.

When we are in the midst of dealing with the consequences of those regrettable decisions, instead of blaming ourselves, we often want to blame others and God. Blame is the name of the game when we don't want to take responsibility. We hear it in courtrooms when defense attorneys want to blame the home environment when their client was growing up, friends, society and more as reasons why they did the things they did. They are implying that they should be let off or given a light sentence because it really wasn't their fault. Now this might be a valid defense because sometimes there are mitigating factors to our behavior. When it comes to the realm of faith and practice this kind of attitude gets us into trouble. It keeps us in a far off land.

Coming to yourself means you acknowledge that you are in the place you are in because of the choices you have made. The younger son did not, at least at this point, blame dad for giving him his inheritance early or his new friends for not being there for him. He realized that he had left home and that home was a much better place than he had ever imagined. His statement that he was rehearsing for his father lets us know that he was taking full responsibility. "I am not worthy to be your son. I have sinned against God and against you." He understood that it was his choices and his alone that led him to the pigsty.

Where do you need to accept responsibility in your life of faith? As I said, you may not find yourself in a far off country but we all know those places in our lives where we have refused to do what God in Christ is calling us to do. We justify our actions instead of acknowledging our sin. For this reason we do not change. I see people carrying grudges for decades, holding prejudices and being spiteful to another, all when we know our faith calls on us to love one another, even our enemies!

I think of the woman in one of my congregations who seemed to spend much of her time during the fellowship time after church complaining about what the church wasn't doing. Her list was long and her words were a slow acting poison getting many of her friends to begin to believe that the church was in serious trouble. Even though

church statistics showed a different picture - attendance was up as well as giving - she continued to complain. One day, I later heard, her closest friend said to her, "When are you going to start being part of the solution?" This led to some angry words and the two friends not talking for a couple of days. But the words had an effect. The woman came to see me shortly thereafter and said, "I have been complaining about how bad things are around here. Maybe I think they are so bad because I am not part of the work of the church. How can I get involved?" She began to help out a bit and as she began to see ministry from the inside she became excited about what we were doing. She had to admit her attitudes were the problem, before change could happen in her life.

Secondly, the young man, after acknowledging his guilt and his desire for things to be better, did the hardest thing he had ever done. He got up out of the pigsty and took that first step towards home. That was what the woman did in coming to see me. She not only heard that her attitude was the problem, she also took a first step to doing something different.

Taking that first step is really difficult, at least some of the time. In turning toward home you now realize how far away you have gone. You have confessed that you are the problem. You have come to terms with the fact that you need to make changes. This also brings with it a bit of humiliation as you realize you failed and now others will know you failed as well. The good thing about this, however, is that usually the image of home, the joy of finally admitting to the problem, the reality that you don't have to live in the pigsty, really gets you moving. There is an adrenalin rush, in the beginning, when you turn.

It's kind of like what happens when you finally decide that you need to start an exercise program. You have spent a long time denying the need, justifying your current actions, and detailing all the reasons that it is impractical. But finally, because a friend or doctor or some other factor, you have resolved to do it. Once you have made the choice, the first days you are ready. You go to the gym, you go walking with a friend, or you take the bike out. You are feeling so positive. You know you needed to make a change and you did it. That heady feeling of achievement gets you going.

Keeping your resolve; that's the hard part whether it is in exercise or other areas of your life and faith. To keep at it until you get home is a challenge. I think of the young man in the story. With each step he thought about the upcoming meeting with his father. The words that sounded so good as he was sitting in the pigsty now sound a harsher tone. What will be his father's reaction? Will he become a slave? I wonder if he thought about stopping anywhere along the path, feeling that he had come far enough. At least he was out of the pigsty! But the hunger in his belly, the emptiness in his heart, kept him slowing plodding towards home. Part of the miracle of the story is not just that he came to himself but that he kept going until he reached home.

We will talk about the reunion next week, but for now we have to ask ourselves where do we need to come to ourselves and admit we are wrong and turn towards home? If we have done this, we have to ask where our resolve is flagging. It is here we need some encouragement. With God and through the love of friends, we will find just what we need to keep us moving. Perhaps God is asking you to be that agent of encouragement for another. Just keep on going in making those life choices. for remember, home and love and forgiveness awaits. More about that next week.