

The Pastor's Reflection

January 31, 2021 – Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. is also available in audio form as part of a devotional service. To access it, click on the link at the top of the Sermons page.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:14-19
Luke 15:11-32

“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.” (Luke 15:20)

Do you feel beaten down by life? Do you feel that you have made a mess of things, that you have failed to live up to your potential? Do you struggle with feelings of inferiority or inadequacy? Do you believe that, in the whole scope of things, you are not worth much? Is there a little voice inside you, a perfectionistic, demanding, idealistic voice or presence that keeps reminding you of this, that keeps beating you down, that focuses only on your mistakes, your shortcomings, never on your strengths, your accomplishments, all the good things you actually do with your life?

BTW, if you are reading this or listening to this and you have a sneaking suspicion that I am talking about you, that I am addressing you, personally, in this reflection, you are correct. It *is* about you.

Not long ago I ran across a story. I had read this story some time ago, perhaps several decades ago. I recall that, at the time, I made a copy of the story and, though I thought it was a little hokey or contrived, I filed it away in a (paper) file marked “Sermon Illustrations,” where it was promptly forgotten. I don’t even know where the file is anymore. It’s too bad, because there is probably some really good stuff in it just waiting to be rediscovered.

When I re-read the story this past week, I regarded the rediscovery as synchronistic, as more than a mere coincidence. It felt meaningful. It seemed that something or someone wanted me to share it. This time around, the story seemed less hokey, less contrived. Perhaps I have grown some over the past few decades. Anyway, the story, which I believe is a true story, is as follows.

In a packed-full auditorium of eager participants, a popular motivational speaker was announced onto the large, well-lit stage to a standing ovation. After the audience was comfortably seated, the workshop leader began his seminar. Without any words of introduction or explanation, he simply held up a shiny new \$100 bill. He showed it to his audience and then asked them, “Who would like this \$100 bill? Please raise your hand.”

Every single hand went up. After surveying the enthusiastic crowd, the workshop leader proceeded to fold the \$100 bill in half. Once again, he showed it to his audience. Once again, he asked them who would like this \$100 bill. Once again, every single hand went up.

After looking around, the workshop leader crumpled the \$100 bill into a ball. After showing his audience the \$100 bill in its newest iteration, he inquired, “Who still wants this \$100 bill?” Once again, every single hand shot up.

After, once again, surveying the crowd, the workshop leader dropped the crumpled \$100 bill on the floor and asked, “What if I do this?” He then stepped on the

bill, crushing it with his shoe. Leaning over, he proceeded to pick up the crumpled and dirty bill. Again, he probed, "Now, who still wants this \$100 bill?" Once again, every single hand shot up.

There was a long moment of silence. Then the workshop leader spoke. He said, "My friends, we have all learned an important lesson here today. No matter what I did to this \$100 bill, you all wanted it. Do you know why you still wanted it? You wanted it at the end just as much as you did when I first showed it to you because, no matter what happened to it, no matter what I did to it, it did not in the slightest decrease its basic value."

The audience was silent. With compassion in his voice, the workshop leader said, "Many of us have been wounded, perhaps many times, by those we loved. We feel down-trodden and crumpled; we have been crushed by the circumstances, the struggles, the burdens, the tragedies, the heartbreaks of life. There are times when we feel worthless; we want to quit; we feel alone; and we wonder if God has forgotten us."

The room was hushed. You could have heard a pin drop.

The workshop leader continued. "The parable of the \$100 bill reminds us, it assures us, it promises us that no matter what happens to us in life, we never lose our value. Each and every one of us is priceless. You and you and you and you are priceless. You are a treasure to others, to life, and you are precious to that God who created you, who is incarnate within you, and who loves you just as you are."

The workshop leader concluded his talk by saying, "Even if what has happened to you in this life, the things that have gone wrong, are partially attributable to your having made bad decisions, bad choices; even if you are at least partially responsible for your not having lived up to your full potential, there is a part of you, a beautiful part of you that remains untouched by what has happened or not happened in the past. This part, perhaps we could call it your soul or your Buddha nature, remains pure, remains full of light. All we have to do is remove the junk that is covering it, and you will see it shine through in a way that will not only light your own path in life; it will give light to those who, like you, know what it means to walk in darkness."

Bear with me as I talk a walk down memory lane. I seem more than marginally inclined to indulge in retrospective this time of year. Perhaps it is because the month of January marks the fifty-second anniversary of my ordination to the Christian ministry. Perhaps it is because the month of March marks the fifty-sixth anniversary of my participation in the March from Selma to Montgomery, where I received my initial call to the ministry. So, please bear with me as I reflect on an experience I had early in my theological education, an experience that has a bearing on what we could call the Parable of the \$100 Bill.

In the summer of 1966, following my first year at Andover Newton Theological School, I participated in a twelve-week full-time program of Clinical Pastoral Education at Tewksbury State Hospital. You know me; I love state mental hospitals! Tewksbury State Hospital, which is still rumored to be haunted, opened in 1854 as the Tewksbury Almshouse, one of three almshouses in Massachusetts dedicated to the care of the poor and the unprecedented influx of immigrants into Massachusetts. In 1866, it began accepting the "pauper insane," thus becoming the first hospital to house and hopefully treat those with a diagnosis of chronic insanity. Anne Sullivan, who became the tutor and companion of Helen Keller, lived at this hospital for four years before she was transferred to the Perkins School for the Blind.

I'm not sure what buildings are still standing there now because I haven't been there in many years, but in 1966, when you went through the front gate, there was a large wooden building on your right, a brown wooden house that may have originally

served as housing for the hospital's Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent. As I recall, it had a large front porch.

This building housed approximately 15-20 young woman in various stages of their pregnancy. It soon dawned on me that this was a home for unwed mothers who hailed from any of the cities or towns in the Merrimack Valley. I wasn't assigned to this unit as a student chaplain. I was assigned to an all-male chronic care unit for chronic schizophrenics, some manic depressives, young men who were suffering from Traumatic Brain Injury from motorcycle accidents while not wearing a helmet (I'm sure they said something like, "wearing a helmet is an infringement on my freedom, my constitutional rights"—does this sound familiar? I would note that their mothers showed up every day to feed them); and men who had contracted syphilis before the advent of penicillin, and whose brains and even their skulls had been eaten away by this bacteria. I will come back to my experience on this unit some other time. Suffice it to say that I learned a lot from the men on my unit and also from the young women who were living, temporarily, in this Home for Unwed Mothers on the State Hospital grounds.

I met some of these young women and had an opportunity to talk with them at meals in the main cafeteria and sometimes as we walked around the hospital grounds in the evenings. I wondered why the State of Massachusetts would need to provide such a setting, such a service. It didn't take me long to realize that every single one of these young women, most in their teens, some in their twenties, had been rejected by their families. They had been abandoned by their parents. They had been kicked out of their home and told that they were never to return, never again to darken the door of the family residence. These young women, who seemed like little girls to me, had basically had no place to go but the street or, occasionally, into the arms of an abusive boyfriend. They all seemed so fragile, so vulnerable.

Their stories were remarkably similar. None of them had consciously intended to become pregnant. Some became pregnant out of ignorance, because they had never had the opportunity to obtain proper, reality-based sex education. Their parents couldn't or wouldn't do it. Churches wouldn't touch this with a ten-foot pole—other than to insist that young people remain celibate until marriage. Schools wouldn't teach sex education because they believed it would encourage children to have sex and become pregnant. Pharmacies and physicians did not make it easy or even possible for most young women (or men) to obtain contraceptive devices like condoms. One young woman told me she had been told that you couldn't get pregnant the first time you had sexual intercourse. This, unfortunately, turned out not to be true.

I heard stories of young women who had been raped. Some had been pressured by their boyfriends: "If you don't have sex with me, I will leave you." And: "How can you be so selfish as to insist on birth control when it diminishes my sexual gratification?" Some were the victim of incest—from uncles, older brothers, and fathers. The perpetrator was seldom a total stranger. It struck me as a little ironic when the girl's father, who had been raping his daughter and made her pregnant, kicked her out of the house, telling her, "You have brought shame to this family!" Or "We have too much pride in this family to let you continue to live here." Doesn't that strike you as ironic?

There were other, more complex psychological problems that I suspect led to some of these pregnancies. Some of these girls felt they had no future; they were not going to be able to do anything important with their life, so why should they care? They had no goals. Erik Erikson would say that some of them, rather than engage in the healthy process of identity exploration, opted for identity foreclosure: "If I become pregnant, then I have an identity; I know who I am—I am a mother."

Most of the girls/young women opted to put their baby up for adoption through the Florence Crittenden League. Some, however, opted to keep the child. With these, the hospital-provided social worker assigned to the mother was an invaluable resource in finding her and her baby a place to live and access to welfare benefits. I think that the service our hospital provided also made it possible for some of these young women to continue to work toward receiving their high school education, though I am not sure about this.

Looking back on this experience, which was only a small part of the formative experience I had that summer at Tewksbury State Hospital, I learned for the first time about the dynamics of what is now called Traumatic Narcissism. It was not uncommon for the girl's parents, usually her father, to say, "How could you do this to me?" As a matter of fact, the girl had not done it to her father or mother; she had just done it for any one of a number of conscious or unconscious reasons. With a narcissistic parent, the bottom line is that it's all about them. When the child's successes become the parent's successes, then the child's failures invariably become the parent's failures. The daughter's pregnancy becomes a narcissistic wound to the parent's fragile self-esteem, a wound that finds voice in what is called narcissistic rage. "Because you have brought shame to your family, I want you to leave our home, our family, and never see us again." One father said to his daughter, "As far as I am concerned, you are dead."

Let's compare this with the passage of scripture we just read or heard—the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

In the Old Testament, which is the record of God's relationship with Israel, a central theme is that of covenant. Some biblical scholars believe this is *the* central theme of the Old Testament. God establishes a covenant between himself and Abraham. This covenant extends to the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah. The covenant is basically this: "I will be your God if you will be my people."

There were times when the Israelites were faithful to this covenant. When they were, God walked with them, blessed them, and gave them power over their enemies. When they observed the covenant, following the many religious and dietary laws commanded by God, they prospered. Although the covenant was originally established between God and a people, the people of Israel, it eventually evolved into a covenant between God and individuals as well.

There were other times when the Israelites were not faithful to the covenant. They broke the covenant. They may have done this by turning to other gods, e.g., when they constructed and then worshipped a golden calf while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. They may have broken the covenant by simply forgetting about Yahweh, forgetting about all he had done for them, how he led them out of slavery in Egypt and gave them the Promised Land. They may have done this by not showing compassion to the widow and the orphan, the sojourner at their gates, by violating not only the Ten Commandments but also the Code of Hospitality.

The Old Testament is a history or description of a people's covenantal relationship with God. There were times when the Israelites turned away from God. There were also times, usually in response to the unfaithfulness of his people, when God turned away from them, when God "hid his face" or "turned his back" on the people of Israel. This theme is articulated quite poignantly in the Psalms. The psalmist often expresses his anger that God has either deserted or punished his people. At other times the psalmist is repentant, and at still other times hopeful—hopeful that the broken covenant could be restored.

When you look at the way our Bible is organized, you can see that this central theme of covenant carries over into the New Testament. Our Bible is comprised of the

Old Testament and the New Testament, more accurately translated as the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

As Christians we believe that Jesus came to articulate or reveal a new covenant between God and us. The central message of the new covenant is that, when we go astray, we do not have to earn our way back into God's good graces. In fact, there is nothing we can do to heal the brokenness that has come about through our sin. The message of the Gospel is that God has already restored the broken covenant, has already forgiven our sins. Jesus, through his death on the cross, paid the price that we could not pay. All we have to do is accept this, believe this, and we are saved.

I confess that I have a little difficulty with this doctrine of covenant and atonement. It seems too narrow to describe our relationship with God. First, as it is described in the Old Testament, God's covenant did not extend past the people of Israel, the sons and daughters of Abraham. The God of such a covenant would be a small, a tribal God. This God would not be the God of all people, the God of all creation. When I think about the depiction of God in the Old Testament, I have the feeling that this God is too small to be the real, the living God.

Second, a covenant is an agreement, a pledge, or a contract. An agreement or a contract can be broken or violated by either party to the agreement. This would make the contract null and void. When the covenant was broken, as it was so many times in the history of Israel, it needed to be restored. According to the Old Testament, the covenant could be restored only through the Israelites' repentance and return to God. If they once again become God's people, he would once again be their God. The people of Israel could accomplish this restoration of the covenant by returning to the revealed religious observances and by living a moral life, a life that is pleasing to God.

My basic problem is that I am uncomfortable with the notion of covenant, especially if it is tied to the matter of sin and the forgiveness of sin. There is no doubt, however, that the theme of forgiveness, the washing away or forgiving of our sins carries over into the New Testament. It is articulated in the Lord's Prayer, where we ask God to forgive our debts or trespasses to the same degree that we forgive those who are indebted to us or who trespass against us. However, even here I believe Jesus was saying more about our need to forgive each other than about God's forgiveness of us.

From a cursory check of my Biblical Concordance, I found there were actually few references to forgiveness in the synoptic gospels--basically only two in Mark and three or four in Matthew and Luke. There is only one in John and only a few in Paul's letters to the early churches, all of which are directed toward the role of forgiveness in human relationships, its importance within the Christian community.

I believe that sin and forgiveness are not the central theme of the New Testament and the gospel that Jesus came to proclaim because the new teaching, the new revelation about God is that our relationship with God is not a covenant. It is not a covenantal pact, a contract that can be broken or severed by either party. It is a relationship. It is the kind of relationship that exists between a parent and a child.

If Jesus was correct in his assertion that God is like a loving parent, then why would God place such importance on sin? If a good and loving human parent would not do this in relation to his/her child, why would God do this in God's relationship with us? If God is like a loving parent, then there could be no list of all the sins we have committed in thought, word, and deed. In any relationship, whether it is the relationship between a parent and a child, a child and a parent, or a spouse and a spouse, a list, a record of all the things the other person has done wrong would be a sure-fire way to kill the relationship. Jesus tells us that our relationship with God is not about sin and forgiveness; *it is about acceptance and love.*

The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of Jesus' central teachings. I do not think it is about forgiveness, about the father's forgiveness of the son. The son admittedly behaves in a reckless and immature manner. His decision to squander his inheritance and live his life in the fast lane is ill advised. Eventually he comes to his senses. He realizes it was stupid to walk away from his father, his mother, and his family, to turn his back on the relationships that should have been in the center of his life. He left home to become free, but it soon becomes apparent to him that he is far from being truly free.

Of course, there is another way of framing the son's actions. I think we could make a case that he was engaging in what Erik Erikson would call identity exploration. In order to find himself, in order to become his true, his authentic self, he had to break free of the persona of a good and dutiful son, one whose meaning in life consisted in matching as closely as possible not only his parents' expectations and demands but also those of the collective, of the Jewish culture and religion of his day. In other words, the son had to discover and integrate his shadow, the parts of him that didn't fit the persona of the good son, as an important first step in his individuation. Note that his older brother, who reveals himself as mean-spirited and petty, has not done this; he has not integrated his shadow, but has projected it out onto his younger brother. The Prodigal Son admittedly acted out his shadow, at least initially, instead of integrating it. It was indeed messy. Then again, isn't that the way most of us do it?

The son, out of his cultural and religious background, initially conceptualizes or casts the problem as one of sin. He says to himself, "I will return home and tell my father, '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 servants.'" The son wants to confess his sin and be forgiven. He wants the broken covenant with his father to be restored. But this is not what happens.

The father "sees his son coming from afar." Why was he able to see him coming from afar? The father was able to see his son while the son was still a long way down the road because the father was standing on the front porch waiting. No matter how many years had passed, the father waited for his son. During this time, according to the Old Testament way of thinking, the covenant between the father and the son was broken. According to the New Testament, however, the bond between the father and the son was not a covenant, not a contract. It was a relationship, a relationship of love. This relationship could never be broken, no matter what the son might do.

Note that the son, when he finally enters into the presence of his father, never gets to confess his "sin." The father, who is "filled with compassion," isn't interested. He doesn't want to make his son crawl. He simply runs to his son, puts his arms around him, kisses him, and welcomes him back with joy. When the son begins his rehearsed speech, the speech about having sinned against heaven and against his father, the father doesn't want to hear it. *The father never actually forgives his son.* He is too busy preparing for the celebration!

Several years ago, I attended a conference on Reactive Attachment Disorder in Children and Adolescents. The presenter made an interesting point, a point that I believe is apropos to the Parable of the Prodigal Son and Jesus' teaching about our relationship with God. The presenter said that whereas a parent *bonds* with a child; a child *attaches* to a parent. A bond cannot be broken, while an attachment can. I think this means that a child can, for whatever reason, break his/her attachment to the parent, but the parent can never break the parent-child bond with the child. This bond is unconditional. There is nothing, *nothing* that the child can do to break it.

Jesus tells us that God's relationship with us cannot be broken. God's love for us is never withdrawn, no matter how stupid, immoral or self-centered we may become. Even if we forget about God, even if we deny God's existence or reality in our

lives, we cannot break this bond, this relationship. God is like the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: patiently waiting for us to return to our true center, to our true nature. In other words, waiting for us to come home.

I think it is unfortunate that we have historically viewed our relationship with God in the terms of a covenant. This metaphor leads us to cast the relationship in terms of broken and restored, broken through sin and restored through forgiveness. This is not the way a parent would view his/her relationship with his/her child. The parent-child relationship is not a covenant that can be broken by anything the child might say or do. The relationship is about love, a love that accepts the child even with his/her shadow side. It is about love—period!

Suddenly the hokey little story about the \$100 bill becomes a profound parable. No matter what we do with our life, the core piece of us that we could call our soul or our Buddha nature or the spark of Divinity within us is not damaged. It *cannot* be damaged or lost. That little voice within us that would convince us that we are a sinner, a loser, a failure, a disappointment to our parents or our family, that little or not-so-little, that subtle or not-so-subtle voice that crushes our self-esteem and leads us into self-destructive patterns of behavior, self-destructive patterns of relationship, cannot have the last word!

I don't know what happened to those young women, those little girls, those vulnerable and fragile little children who were living at the Home for Unwed Mothers at Tewksbury State Hospital the summer that I did my clinical training there. I'm sorry they didn't have parents who, when they learned that their daughter was pregnant, came up to her, put their arms around her, told her how much they loved her, told her what a beautiful person she was, and vowed to walk hand-in-hand with her through the difficult days, the difficult decisions that lay ahead.

I hope and pray that the parents who rejected their daughters, who abandoned them in their time of need, who cast them out into the darkness, did not have the last word. I hope and pray that their daughter somehow learned the lesson of the Parable of the \$100 bill, that no matter what path her life took, no matter how banged up and crumpled she became, she was still a uniquely valuable human being. I hope, I pray that these parents and their daughter somehow found a way to reconcile, to reestablish a relationship with each other.

Even if they weren't able or willing to do this, I hope and pray that these young women somehow discovered, somehow were able to experience their own inner beauty, the beauty of their soul, their Buddha nature, the spark or image of the Divine within them. I hope and pray that in and through their relationship with God, they somehow found the inner strength to live out their lives from a base of unconditional love. If they could do this, I bet they became great mothers!

In the midst of so much darkness, please don't let the light go out. There are people out there who need it.