

Be Reconciled To God

Texts: Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-6:10 Luke 15: 11-32

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Sometimes when we read about Hollywood stars getting a divorce, the reports give the reason as irreconcilable differences, irreconcilable differences.

It means that there has been a breach in the relationship that can't be mended. One or both parties are so hurt, so angry, so disconnected from the other that they can't find a way back to each other, can't find a way to live together again.

It's then that they decide that they have to be apart forever, and the divorce goes through.

Lent is a time when we try to take seriously the idea that there is a breach between us and God, that somehow sin has come into the relationship and broken us apart, disconnected us from God.

We know that there has to be some kind of reconciliation, some kind of coming together again, but the big question is, "Who needs to be reconciled to whom?"

Most of the time I think we have the idea that God is angry with us. Maybe Jesus came and sacrificed himself to appease the wrath of God, the anger of God, so that God could get over it and we could be friends with God again.

But I want to suggest that that isn't the best way of thinking about the situation.

If we look at what Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians, there's nothing about God being reconciled to us, as if God is the one who is angry and is refusing to have anything to do with us until we make it right.

What Paul writes is the very opposite of that, that we are the ones who are refusing to have anything to do with God. What Paul writes to his Corinthian converts is this: "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!"

We are the stubborn ones! We are the resistant ones! We are the ones who are saying, "We don't want to be in this relationship anymore." It is we who have to be reconciled to God, not God to us.

This is the whole point of what God was doing in sending Jesus to us. Paul says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself in Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."

God did it, Paul says, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

What Paul is saying is a bit abstract, but it's not at all abstract in the story of the Prodigal Son.

In that parable, it is the Prodigal Son who departs. He tells his father that he wishes he were dead – that's what it means to demand one's inheritance right now – and off he goes.

The father doesn't kick him out. The father doesn't send him away. The father simply abides by his son's wishes and gives him his freedom, and his portion of the inheritance.

In the story, most interpreters think that the father represents God, and the son represents us.

So off we go, free from God, free from restraint, no more law, no more having to listen to God, angry at God for the onerous restrictions we thought we were suffering under.

But it turns out that it's harder out in the world without God than we had thought. The story says that the son squandered what he had on loose living. Then a famine came, and he had to find some work, so he hired himself out to feed someone's pigs.

To add indignity to indignity, the pigs were eating better than him.

It's at that point that he changes his mind about his father and the life he had with him. That's what repentance means, changing your mind about something. He repents.

He decides to go home. But he is afraid that the bridges have been burned, and he thinks that he's going to have to reconcile his father to him. He's said some terrible things to his father. He's done some terrible deeds.

So the son comes up with this great speech, "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."

He's abject, humiliated, remorseful, self-abasing. He's ready to come back in, even if it's only half in.

But the father never lets him finish his speech. The father doesn't need to be reconciled to his son. He's always loved him. His father has been watching for him through the window. While his son was still far off, he spotted him.

The father needs no reconciliation. He just wants his son back. Robe and rings come out, and a feast is called for. Once the son was reconciled to the father, that was it. Once the son came home, the father was there, waiting.

This is what we are doing in our time of Lent. We are changing our minds about God. We are deciding to head home. Sure, we feel like we have to make some grand speech, but it isn't so. We just have to come back.

Jesus came to us so that we could be reconciled to God, not so God could be reconciled to us. He came so that we might no longer live for ourselves, but for him, full of gratitude that God was right there waiting to welcome us back as soon as we changed our minds and headed home.

In this time of Lent, let us take down all our barriers to God. As Paul did so long ago with the Corinthians, on behalf of Christ, I entreat you: be reconciled to God.