

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, April 20, 2008

“Abiding in Christ: In Affliction and Trial”

John 15:2 and Luke 15:1-32

Dean K. Wilson,

Luke 15:1-32

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

¹ Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Parable of the Lost Son

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer

worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹ "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

The title for today's sermon is "Abiding in Christ: In Affliction and Trial." Said another way: "What in the world do we do when our world collapses around us?" Yeah. What do we do? How do we respond? Where can we find the strength to go on?

This sermon series we have listened to since January, "Abiding in Christ," is based on the words of our Lord Jesus Christ as recorded by the Apostle John in the 15th Chapter of his Gospel. Verses 1 and 2 apply specifically to today's subject:

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

If I am to properly interpret the sense of these verses, the afflictions and trials that come into my life may well represent the pruning of God; pruning so that I "will be even more fruitful."

Well, thank you very much! Pruning. Just what I needed to brighten my day!

It seems to me that the key to learning how to abide in Christ during times of affliction and trial rests in developing an understanding of how we respond to such events in our lives.

The truth is, I do not know any of you well enough to properly evaluate how you would respond in the face of affliction and trial. I do not know how you would act and react when your world gets turned upside down. So, I guess I will have to approach this subject by taking a really hard look at my own life.

Except for my wife of nearly 40 years, no one in this room has ever known me other than as the man who has to walk with two canes, or ride in a powered wheel chair. But, I haven't always been like this.

Eleven years ago, I was a man who moved like the wind.

"That rumble you hear once in a while," someone at the insurance company where I worked back in Connecticut was heard to say, "that rumble is Dean Wilson charging up and down the stairs. I've never seen anybody move up and down stairs faster than Dean."

Then one week, while I was on a business trip in Cincinnati. I came down with what I thought was the flu. And, then I found a blister on the bottom of my right foot that I did not know I had. Diabetes had long ago robbed me of the ability to feel any meaningful sensations from my feet.

Getting sicker by the minute, I boarded a plane to return to Connecticut. By the next morning, I was so sick that I had to call a friend to take me to the hospital emergency room because Shirley was already at her school teaching. In God's Providence, my doctor was already at the hospital attending a seminar. He took one look at my foot and called for his friend, a surgeon.

Blood tests showed that infection had spread into my bloodstream and was coursing through my body and starting to attack my organs. My doctor later shared with me that he was fairly certain I was going to die.

Massive doses of antibiotics, and significant surgical debriding of the wound, brought some healing. But, I was not "out of the woods" by any means. And, my life as I had known it was over. Forever.

Throughout the course of the next months, I ended up having the outside two toes on my right foot amputated. I was placed on seven months of twice-daily intravenous antibiotics, followed by a three-year-long course of powerful oral antibiotics. The wound on my right foot became re-infected twice more before it finally closed. In all, I suffered for over two and a half years with an open wound that would not heal.

Then, just when I thought I was getting better, my knees gave out in the Baltimore Airport. My doctor diagnosed me with progressive, profound osteo arthritis of the knees and hips. Soon, I could hardly walk, could not climb stairs, and within two years, had to end my career as a fire protection engineer and retire on disability because I could no longer perform the necessary field work.

In the midst of all of this, the wound on my right foot opened up again. I began a long period of wound care that included two hospitalizations. Fortunately, I received excellent care from a host of doctors, including our own Mitch Humphrey. This time it took almost three long years before the wound would finally close.

Then, throughout the summer and fall of 2005, I began to have a shortness of breath. In December of that year, I was rushed to the hospital by ambulance and declared to be in congestive heart failure. By God's grace, I survived.

Gastric bypass surgery followed in the summer of 2006. But my recovery couldn't be simple, could it. No, I had to go into kidney failure. The treatment for the kidney failure put me back into congestive heart failure.

I think I'll stop talking about my medical woes now. First of all, you didn't come here this morning for an "organ recital." And, secondly, your story is probably even more horrific than mine.

After all, I only lost a couple of toes and a way of life. Maybe you have suffered through the death of a spouse, or a child, or some other loved one. Maybe you have seen your career tumble into shambles because someone at work decided to treat you unfairly. Maybe you have watched your financial security evaporate in a falling stock market, or a bad investment scheme of some kind.

I just don't know what you have experienced in your life. But, I know this for sure: you've had afflictions in your life and you've had trials in your life. The question for you and the question for me is "How do we respond?"

Frankly, we respond in anger.

Anger is a very interesting emotion. It comes in all varieties. Sometimes anger appears like a pot of slowly boiling water. Over time, that kind of anger gets hotter and hotter until it boils over. That boiling kind of anger can last a very long time before it boils over. It can last hours, days, even months and years. Once it boils over, it can take a very long time to cool off.

Sometimes anger appears like a stick of dynamite with a very short fuse. Once the torch hits the fuse, an enormous explosion erupts that flattens everything in its vicinity. That kind of explosive anger can have a short fuse or a very, very short fuse. Once it explodes, the anger itself can wither away to nothing in an instant. But the damage around the site of the explosion may never be repaired.

We really don't like to talk about anger, unless we can do so in the abstract. Said another way, most of us will gladly talk about anger, as long as we are talking about someone else. We don't like to confront our own anger, or even admit we become angry. And most of all, we do not like to talk about the fact that from time to time every single one of us becomes angry with God.

"Oh, now hold on," you may say. "Angry with God? Are you kidding? Who in the world would ever admit that he or she would become angry with God?"

Okay. Here's the deal. I frankly don't have enough time this morning to try to win you over to my way of thinking. So, I'm just going to lay it out for you and then let the Holy Spirit either confirm that what I am saying is the truth, or take my words and cast them away into the wind.

You see, I believe that every single one of you has been angry at God at some point in your life. In fact, I believe that some of you have been angry at God for a long time and are still, to this very day, angry with Him.

That's right. I'm talking about being angry with God. Our God. Our Father. The God of the Universe. The One who created us. The One who chose us before the foundation of the earth to belong to Him. That God. Angry with that God. Angry with Him.

I cannot possibly address today's topic: "Abiding in Christ: In Affliction and Trial" unless I deal with the most pervasive aspect of this subject. When you and I face affliction and trial in our lives, at some point in our processing what's happening to us, we will feel anger toward God.

Why some of you regularly shake your head and wonder what God is doing. How can he possibly allow 416 children to live in an environment in Texas where they are subjected to physical and sexual abuse, all in the name of honoring what the cult members are calling "God's Law."

When a hurricane and resulting flood sweeps across the Gulf Coast and leaves thousands of the poorest people in that region without homes, some of you have at least thought about how you would take care of such matters if you were God. And, you are most certainly not at all pleased with the way He is taking care of the situation, or even that He permitted it to happen in the first place.

Or when people you know, or know about, die because radical-thinking adherents to some religion crash airplanes into the World Trade Center, or the Pentagon, or a field in southwestern Pennsylvania, just for a moment—or maybe from that day to this one—you feel a bit of anger toward the God who would permit such a tragedy.

And what if your theology holds to the orthodox belief that every thing that happens can only happen if God so ordains it?

Well, enough of the abstract.

What about you? What about those times in your life when things have not gone the way you wanted them to go? Did you respond by being angry with God? Of course you did!

What was the issue for you? What pushed you over the edge? Did you get sick? Did you watch someone you love battle illness, get weaker and weaker, until they died in your arms? Did you experience the sudden death of a loved one in an accident or because of a heart attack? Did you lose a child during childbirth? Did you want to have children so badly that you would do almost anything, but years passed and you remained childless? Did someone steal your reputation? Did you lose your fortune? Did an unfair supervisor at work make your daily life miserable, but you just could not afford to give up your job? Did a fire claim all your possessions? What was the issue for you?

Oh, I know I probably haven't even come close to naming your issue. But, if you will only be honest with yourself, you will have to admit that sometimes the kinds of things that happen in your life have pushed you to the point that you have been angry with God. For some of you, that anger may have only lasted for a moment. For others of you, hidden in the deep recesses of your heart, you still harbor anger—even resentment—toward God.

In the moment of our anger, every one of us turns and runs away from God. Yes, we run away from God. It's the only logical thing to do. When we believe someone is hurting us deliberately, we turn and run. We run as far away and as fast as we can.

But, do you know what? God understands. That's right. God understands. He understands our frustration, our heartache, and He understands our anger. He understands our anger, even when it's directed at Him.

And, what is even more amazing, He loves us just the same. Unbelievable. But, it's true.

One of the most amazing parts of the three parables from our Scripture text for this morning takes place in verses 17 through 24.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

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The son came to his senses. In the Greek text for this passage the sense goes something like this: "when he returned to his proper thinking" or "when his mind began to function clearly" or "when his reason began to rule his emotions." Wow! Imagine that. When he came to his senses he did the only thing he could possibly do: he acknowledged his sin, turned his back on that sin, and returned to his father in a spirit of humility.

But, the part of this parable I like the best is the part where the Scripture tells us that "while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

Did you get that? While the son was still "a long way off," his father saw him. Did you ever think why the father saw his son? It didn't just happen. The father didn't just happen to walk by and see his son in the distance. He saw his son because he was looking for him. In fact, I believe the father stood looking for his son every single day since the son left the father's side.

In responding to the afflictions and trials in your life, has your anger, or your sorrow, or your unbelief pushed you away from the abiding presence of the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you know that every day since you stormed away, or walked away, or crawled away from Him, He has been looking for you, watching for you, waiting for you to come to your senses and return to Him?

In a sentence, what I am trying to share with you today might go something like this: "When our anger at afflictions and trials pushes us away from God, He lovingly waits for us to come to our senses and return to Him." Let me say that again, "When our anger at afflictions and trials pushes us away from God, He lovingly waits for us to come to our senses and return to Him."

If you are looking for a way to respond to the truth of what I am saying, let me offer this suggestion: starting today when you get home from Church, read the passages in Luke 15 and John 15 again. After you've read those passages, ask yourself whether or not you harbor any anger against God. If the answer is "yes," then let me respectfully suggest that you stop, bow your head in prayer, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to a place where you can come to your senses and return to God.

So, my suggested assignment has three parts:

- First, reread the text from Luke 15 and John 15.
- Secondly, examine your own heart to see if you harbor anger or resentment or disappointment with God.
- Then, thirdly, ask God in prayer to send the Holy Spirit to guide you to a place in your thinking where you can come to your senses and begin to make your way back into the shelter of God's Presence.

One day a man waited expectantly for his wife and four daughters to sail across the ocean to join him. He had recently seen his fortune destroyed by the Great Chicago Fire. He had sailed ahead of his family to England in the hopes of rebuilding a life for them there. As a result, he had been away from his family for an extended period of time. His heart ached at the thought of them. He longed to be with them once again.

Then the horrible news of a shipwreck reached him. Fearing the worse, he waited for days and days to hear whether or not they had survived. Finally, he received the news from his wife—two simple words—"Saved, alone."

All four of his beautiful, dearly loved daughters had perished in the shipwreck. He had lost his fortune. And, now, he had lost his family.

Out of his broken heart, Horatio G. Spafford, penned these words to a familiar hymn:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

“When our anger at afflictions and trials pushes us away from God, He lovingly waits for us to come to our senses and return to Him.”

Amen.