

## **Sermon Lent 4 Year C by Ron Kolanowski at St. James, March 14, 2010**

*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! Amen.*

The readings this week contain themes of God's forgiveness, mercy and joy, of coming home, and a new creation in Christ.

In Corinthians we hear..."From now on we regard no one from a human point of view, *'we are a new creation in Christ.'* Christ reconciling the world to himself redeems us of our prodigal state and we become *"ambassadors for Christ."* By God's power we are a new creation. We come home again...crossing into our promised life in Christ.

The parable of the prodigal son is a story of coming home, of God's graciousness, of forgiveness, of rejoicing and celebration set against one of human jealousy, will and entitlement.

The parable is preceded by two other parables. In the first the Shepherd leaves the flock in search of the one lost sheep. In the second, the woman with ten coins who lost one searches the house until she finds that one lost coin. Both end with rejoicing and celebration...as does the parable of the prodigal son...a coming home...a being made whole again. And yet, the story of the prodigal son, has another element...the active participation of the prodigal and the dutiful son. No longer is it a passive sheep or coin that is reclaimed, but people whose choices add a more complex dimension.

A few years ago in a class we did a dramatization of the prodigal son gospel. When our leader asked, *'Who wants to play the dutiful son?'* I and

another person shouted out...*'I want to do it.'* We practically arm wrestled for the part.

I wanted to do it because I can identify with the dutiful son. I try to play by the rules. I want to do what is expected of me. I want to GET IT RIGHT. AND I want the goodies that come with being 'the good boy'...the approval, the respect, and the entitlement that is supposed to come to those who play by the rules.

Upon reflection I see strong parallels between the dutiful son **and** the prodigal son. In ways they are both lost for a time. The prodigal shakes off the mantle of responsibility and says to his Father, *"I don't need you, I can make it on my own. I want to be 'free to be me.'* *Being saddled with this farm and your ways are out of step. I know how to deal with the world. I don't need other people. I don't need your community, your structures, and your rules. I'm tired of obeying what you want."* What happens? He fails miserably without his community, his family and his father's support.

The dutiful son is the opposite extreme, but basically does the same thing. *"This may be the old man's farm, but I know best how to run it. I'll just bide my time, play by HIS rules, or at least pretend to play by his rules. I will get his approval and that of the whole family. And, once I'm in charge, watch out."* While on the outside the dutiful son seems to have it altogether, he is lost too—missing the lessons of the father. Putting his will and sense of entitlement before that of graciousness and forgiveness.

**Both are lost in the myth of their own self-sufficiency.** Both are prodigal...one because of choices that lead to defeat and isolation, and one whose prodigal state is wrapped up in entitlement.

What happens when we lose our way? What happens when we rely solely on our power and the illusion that we are in control and self-sufficient? What happens when we sever ties to family, friends and isolate ourselves from our communities of support? What happens when we use those family members, friends and communities for our personal gain?

The trap for both sons is the trap we all face. It is a lie that we can do it alone...a lie woven into the fabric of our society and heralded in American culture.

These readings are perfect readings for my first Sunday as your new vicar. First, they are a reminder that I cannot go this alone. I join you in your ministry as you fulfill God's mission in this corner of Connecticut. You have been in ministry for over 275 years. I am simply joining you in the work you have already begun, to support you; walk with you in your sorrows, joys and life journeys; to extend God's blessing and to love you as brothers and sisters in Christ. Secondly, the readings also remind me that I won't get it right all the time. There are times when I will 'get it' absolutely correct, but I shall also make mistakes big and small. So I ask for your forgiveness and patience in advance of those mistakes. Thirdly, these readings remind me and hopefully all of us that we are not in control and we are certainly NOT self-sufficient...we need one another and to acknowledge that God is in charge. Corinthians reminds us....there is a new order again in Christ. Christ transforms and makes all things new. But do we really believe it? Do we live as if we believe God has the power? What would it look like in our lives, in this church, or the broader Christian community if we truly believed that Christ has the power and IS transforming and IS making

things new again and again...regardless of what we do or don't do.

Moreover, in spite of the barriers we create, Christ breaks in, transforms lives, is alive and at work, forgiving, calling the lost sheep, finding the lost coin, reconciling the prodigals and dutiful sons and daughters in our world.

The lesson to be taken from the prodigal and dutiful sons, is to set aside our power...to get out of the way and invite God to break in. In short, we are to stop trying to be God...and let God be God.

This is the first step of 12 step programs...to recognize that we are not in control...to turn over my power to a higher power. This is hard to do. I want to hang on to my anger and rage at those who have slighted me somehow. I want to control my world. Because if I don't have control...*I won't know who I am anymore.*

Our God stands at the edge of the field scanning the horizon for us, waiting, searching, ready to make whole the prodigal pieces of our lives...ready to welcome us home...transforming us in spite of ourselves...making a new creation in spite of our desire to stay in the old order.

*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! Dare we believe it? Amen.*