

Hespeler, 31 March, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Joshua 5:9-12, Psalm 32:1-11, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

We read a story today – a rather famous story told by none other than Jesus – in which a young man gets a number of things tragically wrong. He goes to his father and asks to receive the inheritance that will rightly be his upon his father’s death. That is a bad thing to do. He is basically saying to this man who has done everything for him that he doesn’t value him as a father. He is saying that he would rather have him dead so that his value can be converted into cold, hard cash.

Can you imagine how much it would have hurt for a father to hear something like that? I’m pretty sure it would have broken his heart. And that is all on the son. But the father, perhaps recognizing his own imperfections in the parental role (for, I’m sad to say, there is no such thing as a parent who gets it all right) gave in to his son’s demand. Perhaps he was at a loss and didn’t know what else to do.

But the young son was not finished making bad choices. He went away to a distant land, foolishly thinking that he would leave all of his problems behind him. That is a strategy that almost never works. His problems went with him because he carried them within. The next mistake was to waste the precious resources that had been maintained and passed down by his family for generations. He threw it all away because he did not know its true value. He made bad connections – befriending people who did not value him for who he was but merely for what they could get out of him. Such people never make good friends.

The young son truly did mess up. But, you know what, I’m not going to write him off because of all that. Yes, he was foolish. Yes, he valued the wrong things. Yes, worst of all, he deeply hurt people who cared about him. But I have done that and so has pretty much everybody else. I think I’m actually pretty fortunate that, when I messed up, the consequences that were visited upon me did not lead to me sitting starving in a pigpen and dreaming about eating the food that I was supposed to feed the pigs. But it could have. I suspect that all of us have made mistakes in our lives that, had the circumstances been right, would have lead to a similar dire situation.

For example, one good way that someone the age of that young son can really mess up their life is by not taking their education seriously. A young person who is not interested in study and work – who only sees school as a place where they plan for their next party – runs a very serious risk of



messing up the remainder of their life. We all agree that is true, right?

But is it? It may well be true if you are poor, a member of a racial minority or don't have other advantages, but there are other young people who seem to have this privilege of being able to mess up without worrying about consequences. We just heard about a scandal in the last couple of weeks in which wealthy parents bribed their children into the best of colleges and universities regardless of how seriously those children had taken their education. Some people are spared the worst consequences of their errors because of who their parents are or because of other advantages that they have. But I think we can probably all say that we have done some things that could have, given the right circumstances or the lack of certain privileges, landed us in a very bad place.

What I'm saying is that I am not willing to condemn the young son because he messed up. Neither, by the way, is his father. And since Jesus told this parable in a way that clearly was trying to teach us something about God, neither does God. The crisis in this story is not that somebody sinned or made a big mistake. Sin and error are just part of what it means to be human. Sin, as a problem, is something that God has taken care of. That is what the coming of Jesus is all about. The crisis is in something else.

That brings us to the words of the psalm that we read together this morning. It is what is called a penitential psalm – a song that was written to be used by worshipers who have messed up and want to make things right. It is a prayer that certainly could have been prayed by the young son at his lowest point. But, as a prayer, it also points out where the biggest problem is. The penitent says this, **“While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.”**

You see, sins, mistakes errors and screw-ups they can all be overcome. In fact, they have all already been overcome. Jesus came and he was obedient even unto the cross so that the power of sin over the lives of people might be broken. We do not need to be in bondage to sin, not here and now and not in the life to come either. But people *are* in bondage. Many people are caught in patterns of disobedience or dependence. Many people are victimized by violence or hatred. Many more are trapped in the consequences of their own foolishness or of the evil systems set up by others. So what is the problem? What is it that keeps us in bondage to all of these things? I think that this psalm hits the nail on the head. The problem is silence.

I mean this certainly applies to the young son in the parable of Jesus. I suspect that he knew very early on that he had messed up. He knew it when he saw the hurt in his father's eyes as he made his request for the inheritance. He knew it when the wild life that he was living in that far distant country did not satisfy him. He knew it as he watched the people that

he had thought were his friends turn away from him when his money ran out. But clearly there was a long walk from knowing the truth of his errors and speaking them aloud even to himself. He held his silence. Why? Out of pride; out of a stubbornness that is common to us all. (The psalmist also hits the nail on the head when he compares us to, **“horse or a mule, without understanding.”**) He kept his silence out of fear of further repercussions. The reasons for his silence might have been many, but the fact of the matter is that his situation only went downhill while he kept silent about his errors.

But as soon as he decided to speak, everything changed. I’m not saying that it was easy. I am quite sure that he felt a whole lot worse before he began to feel better. But that decision to speak up about how he had messed up was the beginning of healing for himself and for his father and even, I would suggest, for his older brother.

But we all get stuck in that time of silence don’t we? You know that you have hurt somebody. You can feel it every time you are in their presence. The feelings of resentment and tension only build and build. And the longer you wait, the harder it is to move from silence to speech. But breaking the silence is truly the only way to move forward.

It is the same thing with God. I know that doesn’t make sense to some people. Why do you have to tell God your sins or the things that you regret? Doesn’t God already know everything about you? Why do you have to say it; it can be so hard to say – hard for your pride, hard to admit your own weakness. If it doesn’t change anything for God, why do you have to say it? Well, I don’t presume to understand it all from God’s point of view, but I do know this: it certainly changes something for you when you break that silence. It is precisely because it is so hard for you – because you don’t want to do it – that speaking honestly with God about your failures can begin to change things for you. It frees you to start moving forward to new and better ways of acting and being.

And sometimes it is also helpful to speak to God through another human being. I know that, as Protestants, we don’t buy into the whole Roman Catholic sacrament of confession. We don’t believe that you have to go through a priestly mediator in order to find forgiveness from God. But they are not completely wrong in their approach. Sometimes speaking to a wise and trustworthy spiritual counsellor – to speak aloud to another human being our regret – can be a very helpful experience, especially when the person you open up to is then able to speak to you the words of grace and forgiveness that God would speak to you because of Jesus. You break your silence and they break the silence of God and healing and hope can abound.

There are other ways in which silence is the enemy. When people remain in silence, that is an environment in which guilt and shame breed and become ever stronger in their destructive power. Shame, in particular, is a very destructive force – especially when people are made to feel ashamed of

things that are completely beyond their control. When someone feels shame for something that is simply a product of who they are (their heritage, their gender, their sexual orientation) or because of something that has been done to them (rape, abuse, other crimes) it can destroy lives. Even when people feel shame for something that is a result of their own choices, it is rarely a helpful or productive thing.

Shame festers in silence. It spreads its destructive power to every area of a person's life and can damage their every relationship. But breaking the silence robs shame of its power. When we speak of the reasons for shame aloud, we can realize how ridiculous they often are. And when we speak words of grace and forgiveness aloud, shame is revealed to be a powerless tyrant, defeated by God's love.

And what of the other sins that plague this world? Sins like racism and hatred, sins like economic systems that drive some people deeper and deeper into poverty while a few reap all of the riches and then think they can bribe their kids' way into top colleges, sins like an opiate crisis that inflicts our entire society because countless people were driven into addiction by drug companies that, thinking only of their profits, promised doctors that they could prescribe their opioids to patients without worrying that it would lead to addiction even though this was a lie.

Well those sins all thrive in an environment of silence. So long as people are afraid to speak up and name what is happening, these things will continue to rule in this world. So long as people don't challenge the racism or injustice that they see, it will continue to flourish. So long as we fail to call greed the sin that it is, it will continue to be presented as a virtue and the world will never change. So long as silence is the rule, so will sin be.

The psalmist was incredibly wise. Silence is often the root of so much of our misery. God has done so much to take care of the power of sin and guilt and shame, but the roadblock that gets in the way of us experiencing everything that God has done for us is silence. So I will close today by asking you a simple but very hard question: is there a silence that you need to break? Is there someone that you have wronged and you know it but you haven't been able to say it to them? Speak. Do you need to break the silence between you and God about something that you have regretted or resented? Speak. Or do you need to speak up about something that is just wrong in some situation that you find yourself in? Speak. It is the simplest thing in the world, but it can also be the hardest thing you have ever done. May God give you the strength and the grace to break the power of silence.