

The Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost, October 23, 2016
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 – The Prodigal Son

*Will you persevere in resisting temptation, seeking one another's forgiveness and God's?
We will, with God's help.*

This fall, we are exploring our Baptismal promises. These promises describe and define our baptized life in Christ, as well as declare our intentions in living this life. As we affirmed just a moment ago, this week we boldly proclaim that we promise to persevere in resisting temptation, seeking one another's forgiveness and God's. This week's promise is important not only because of the ideal to which we strive, but also because within this promise lies the presumption that we will fail.

From the beginning, we have been created by God to be *imperfect people of joy*. We are imperfect, not because of a mistake – some misstep during the work of creation – rather because God alone is perfect. And as beloved creatures of God, we live in a world that is thoroughly imperfect and yet is also filled with God's grace for no other reason than the overflowing abundance of God's love. It is this grace that allows us to be joyful. But we are given the freedom to live unjoyful lives – lives that deny this truth and that are fueled with the desperate striving to earn the gift of grace that has already been given.

You may know me as your priest. You may know me as your pastor. You may know me as your teacher, preacher, and sister in Christ. Today, you will also know me as a Prodigal Daughter. So, to you this morning, I re-introduce myself: My name is _____ and I am an alcoholic. By the grace of God and through the support of Alcoholics Anonymous, I have been sober for nearly 13 years. I now live a resurrected life – a life I never knew was possible. An *imperfect life filled with grace, love, and joy*. A life that I was given once I died to my pursuit of perfection; when I died to my fears of unworthiness and shame; when I died to my desperate seeking and clutching to a broken and pain-filled life; when I had no other choice but to die to myself. I died to my old life not because I wished to or because I was heroic. I died to my old life because the alternative was unbearable.

As the parable of the Prodigal Son reveals, for many of us (maybe most?) this path to resurrected life is one not of admirable courage and purity of heart. This path is most often the one of failure which we take only because there are no other options left. It truly becomes the path of life or death. And the great divine irony is that what may seem like paths of life are actually paths of death...and yet the path of death becomes the one that leads to new and resurrected life.

Ever since I was young, I suspected that there was something wrong with me...that I wasn't like other people...that there was a deep flaw in my being. I now know that I suffered from mental illness – chronic depression caused by bad brain chemistry – but at the time it seemed a moral and personal failure that marred by worthiness for love. I recall my first experience of depression and dissociation when I was only twelve years old. Growing up in a household situation that required hiding its true nature, I learned early on how to hide whatever was feared to be unacceptable.

Early on I discovered the soothing balm of alcohol and drugs. I was thirteen when I first got high, fourteen when I stole my first bottle of wine from a neighbor's outdoor storage refrigerator, and fifteen when I stole a pack of wine coolers and a carton of cigarettes from the

A&P grocery store. Around the same time, my home situation blew up in a big, ugly, and violent way, and the only way I knew how to deal with it was to repress it entirely.

All through college, I drank heavily. I quickly learned that I had a much higher tolerance than most of my peers – good alcoholic genetics at work. Through those four years, I also suffered two bouts of major depression, which only reinforced my sense that there was something seriously wrong with me. My drinking also led me to other risky behaviors, as you can imagine, which only served to deepen my shame.

I tell you all of this not to make excuses for what I've done or the bad decisions I've made, but in order for you to understand the context for my alcoholism. While it certainly has run in my family and I clearly have a genetic pre-disposition to dependency, alcohol largely became for me a means of self-medication when I had no other resources at my disposal. And it worked.... it worked for some time. Eventually however, alcohol ceased to help and instead became the primary problem.

My twenties were full of ups and downs...and mostly I was just relieved when I made it through that decade. I met my husband, fell in love, and got married. We bought our first house together, and my career began to take off. We had trouble getting pregnant but eventually our daughter Emma was born – the most beautiful and perfect child I had always hoped for – and everything *should* have been perfect. You see, I should have felt blessed and been content. I achieved the aspects of adult life that were *supposed* to make me happy and satisfied. And yet, each achievement seemed to further my self-contempt and destruction – rather than being sources of affirmation of my worthiness, they somehow only mirrored and magnified my hidden flaws and shame.

Two weeks after Emma turned one year old, I hit bottom. I could no longer live with myself – I could no longer survive the self-contempt I felt every morning when I looked myself in the mirror. I could no longer face a future living as I was. I distinctly remember one night calculating how much longer I would likely live this way and feeling overwhelmed in hopelessness because it was longer than I could take if my life continued this way. As we say in AA, this is the moment when we realize we could live no longer with alcohol or without it. I felt like I was the walking dead. Little did I know that recovery would also be a path of death...a path of death to self but one that leads to new and resurrected life.

You see, the grace and love given as gift by God became distorted within me and become sources of shame and self-contempt instead. That was my true sin – that I believed that this distorted image was the real me rather than the image that God sees. God never needed to sentence me to hell...I took up residence there all on my own. God doesn't need to condemn us for we do that just fine ourselves. God instead calls us to die to that life – die to that distortion – so that we may instead be risen to the life He has always intended for us. God bids us to die so that we may be raised to new life and join him as he rejoices and celebrates our return.

The work of recovery was hard – and still is hard – and I realized that I had to tear down everything I thought I knew about myself, God, and the world. I had to burn it to the ground so that something new could rise from those meager ashes. It is painful when you realize that you don't know who you are. It is painful to realize you can't rely on your own vision and understanding of the world. It is painful to start over – to rebuild your sense of self from the ground up. But I discovered that, in this hard and uncomfortable work, I found new life I never knew possible. I found that the real me had always been there, but I had hidden it from myself. I found that grace, forgiveness, and love abounded and had been always available to me...if only I

removed my blinders to see the gift. I learned that I can't earn what had already been freely given, but I can reject it by living as if it weren't true.

That is what is revealed in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son takes his inheritance, leaves home, and blows it all on good times, wine, women, and song. He then runs out of money, luck, and guile, and falls on very hard times. Desperate, hungry, and pitiful, he returns home in shame to beg his father for laborer's work. But his father had already forgiven him – forgiven him before he had even left – and had been only waiting for the Prodigal Son to return. Each day, the father had scoured the horizon, ever hopeful that he will see his beloved son. Then one day he does and runs to embrace him. Before the Prodigal Son can even recite his whole story of woe and beg forgiveness, the father cuts him off and rejoices! He immediately turns to his servants and says: “Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (Luke 15:22-24)¹

Like the forgiving father, God waits for us, too, scouring the horizon for the first sight of our return. And when we do return, bedraggled, banged up, and defeated as we may be, God will joyfully embrace us. This is the *outrageousness of Jesus' message* – the *outlandishness of God's love* – that we are already forgiven...have always been forgiven. For whatever reason, it seems that the leaving and returning are essential for our salvation. For many of us, we must realize we are in need of God's grace in order to experience its real and active presence in our lives - grace that had been given us all along. We must realize that we are, in fact, already dead in order to live new and resurrected lives. That is why sometimes there can be such painfully beautiful salvation found when we run out of rope and can no longer continue to live as we had. Because, then we can begin to live the lives God has meant for us all along. Then we can enjoy the beauty and freedom found when we live as the *imperfect people of joy* that we were created to be!

Amen.

¹ NRSV