

Lent 4C (3/31/2019)

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

We live in an “I told you so” world. We expect that life will be more or less fair, and people will get what’s coming to them, good or bad. But God is an “I love you no matter what” God. This is good news when we’re longing for a full measure of grace. But, it’s also good news when we prefer judgment over mercy – when we resist grace – and God invites us to the feast anyway.

There is a hand-painted sign hanging on the wall in our living room that reads “I love you no matter what.” It’s easy to say it in our family, but some days it’s harder to mean it. We need the sign to remind us because “I love you no matter what” is a difficult promise to make and to keep. Marriage is a daily choice Bethany and I have to make to love and honor one another. And, parenthood is a daily exercise in selflessness. We can only imagine the ways our children will test our love over the years, the many causes of anxiety and heartbreak. So, we say “I love you no matter what” as much for ourselves as for them. It’s a sort of mantra, a prayer for patience and grace regardless of the circumstances.

And, we’ll need to keep teaching ourselves to say it because steadfast love is so hard to come by. **“I love you no matter what” is rare because we live in an “I told you so” world.** We expect that life will be more or less fair, and people will get what’s coming to them, good or bad. We’re quick to measure others

against standards that we set, and quick to mark their failures. And, we get gratification from saying, “I told you so.” (And even if we don’t say it, we think it.)

“I told you so” is seductive because it helps us preserve the illusion of control. We’ve convinced ourselves that as long as we conform to the right way of doing things, then we ought to see positive results. If, however, we step out of line, then there’s no excuse when things go wrong. “I told you so” satisfies the urge to manage an existence that is often unpredictable.

This is why it’s so painful when our children deviate from the plan. They don’t meet our very reasonable expectations for behavior. They run with the wrong crowd. They get into trouble. They drop out of school. They refuse to take our advice. They marry the wrong person. They abandon our traditions. Sometimes, our children’s choices lead to undesirable outcomes, and God forbid we lose them forever. More likely, they find their way back home, at which point we have a choice between “I told you so” and “I love you no matter what.”

I suspect that more than a few of us would prefer that the story of the Prodigal Son end differently. Imagine that the father grudgingly receives his younger son back into the household, and instead of rejoicing at his return, merely tolerates his presence. Imagine that the father celebrates instead his elder son’s years of faithful service. The elder son certainly deserves to be recognized for his hard work and loyalty. It’s only fitting that he receive a robe and a ring and a lavish party, while his younger brother suffers the natural consequences of

his actions. That's the way the story should end in an "I told you so" world. After all, what kind of values does the father uphold by rewarding the disrespect and betrayal of his younger son? What kind of virtue does he teach?¹

The extravagance of the father's grace – the abandon with which he embraces his wayward son – is meant to surprise, even offend us. Making a fool of himself in front of his more dignified neighbors, the father rushes out to meet his son while he is still far off and wraps him in his arms. He interrupts his son's well-rehearsed speech, calling for the finest clothes and the most abundant feast. In spite of his son's defiance, the father has longed for his return and immediately restores his dignity and place in the household. Instead of "I told you so," he chooses to say "I love you no matter what."

We may live in an "I told you so" world, but God is an "I love you no matter what" God. It is God's nature to seek the lost and celebrate our homecoming, our reconciliation. There is no defiance, no rejection, no misstep that can separate us from the Father's love,² and it's never too late to be reconciled to God.

This is good news when we, like the younger son, are in need of a full measure of grace. But, what about those of us who identify with the elder son? What about those of us who resent the father's generosity toward the prodigal

¹ See comment quoting Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-4-c-the-prodigal-god/>.

² See Romans 8:38-39.

son? The good news is that **God also rushes out to meet us in our bitter self-justification, and faced with our defiance, God extends to us the same promise of grace: “Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” The good news is that when we prefer judgment over mercy – when we resist grace – God invites us to the feast anyway.**

The question remains: Will we go in to the party or not? Will we stubbornly hold on to our “I told you so” tendencies and miss out on the wealth of God’s grace? Or, will we be transformed by God’s “I love you no matter what” and learn to share abundant life with others, even those we deem less worthy of it?