

“How We Change”
Luke 15:1–10
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I will never forget a conversation I had with a man who worked at the old Norman Stockton clothing store in Winston-Salem. I always worked with him when I needed new clothing not just because I knew him but because he was great with colors and styles and, shocking though this may be to some of you, I was not... He was also a part-time church musician. So, we had this church thing in common too.

As I was looking at new dress pants and sport coats, I noted that my pants in particular looked really bad. I wear out the edge of the pockets because I put my hands in them too often. “I just need to quit putting my hands in my pockets,” I said, to which my friend replied, “We don’t change who we are.”

I have thought about that simple statement over the years, and there is a lot of truth in it. Our basic character does not change very much nor do many of our quirks, habits, and tendencies. One of the oldest words of wisdom about marriage is, “Don’t marry someone expecting to change them.” If there are qualities in another person we don’t like, we should not deceive ourselves into thinking he/she will change. *Once we are married, he won’t cheat anymore... Once we are married, she won’t badger me about that... Once we are married...* The person we marry is the person we will live with.

Even recovery programs have had to come to terms with the persistence of habits. One recovery hospital I know of looked like it had become one of the most successful in the country until they did some long-term assessments and discovered that they needed to put a footnote by many of those success stories. Over time many people returned to their addiction or simply substituted one substance for another, for example, alcohol instead of heroin. We don’t change who we are.

And yet, does this mean that we never change or simply that it is difficult to do so, and thus we need help? To assume that change is

impossible is cynical and self-defeating. It suggests that what I do here is an utter waste of time, though as a parent and a preacher, I have grown accustomed to wasting my breath... But if we never change, Jesus wastes a lot of time and breath too because his entire life and ministry, as well as his death and resurrection, are focused on helping people change.

It begins with something called “repentance,” a term used multiple times in our reading from Luke. It refers not just to a bad feeling about something but to a change of heart and redirection of life, a complete about face or to the rear march. Apparently, Jesus thinks people can change; indeed, even the people who seem most incapable of it, those viewed to be sinners in his time by good respectable folk, can change. That is why he is hanging out with them at the beginning of the reading, and *that* is why some of the religious leaders are grumbling at Jesus.

In response to the criticism, he tells three parables, two of which are included in our reading — one about a lost sheep, the other about a lost coin. The shepherd with one hundred sheep leaves the ninety-nine that are safe to recover the one that is lost. The woman with ten coins searches diligently for the one that is lost. In the parable we have not read, it is a son who is lost until he is found.

All three parables point to the reality that God is most concerned about people who need to change the most. There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, Jesus says, than for all those who need no repentance. But the bottom line is that change can happen, even in extreme circumstances. Repentance is possible. The only question is as to how it happens.

It begins with an acknowledgment of need. There will be no repentance among those who see no need for it, no change by those who think they are fine like they are. Yet we all have things in our lives that need to change. None of us is like the woman Mark Twain described as immorally impoverished, she had nothing from which to repent! We all have flaws and frailties. Acknowledging them creates the possibility for change, and it makes us more pleasant to be around. As a Yiddish proverb says, “Better a sinner who knows he is a sinner than a saint who knows he is a saint (*Who Needs God*, Harold Kushner, p. 185).”

Yet sometimes it is the would-be saintly people who have the most difficulty acknowledging frailty. If we think we always do what is right, we may not very easily recognize our flaws. In the reading from Luke, the religious leaders are keenly aware of the sinfulness of some people Jesus allows to come near him, but are they aware of their need for repentance? They are all fired up in the judgment not just of the sinners but of Jesus, but they are wrong about the sinners, God still loves them; they are wrong about Jesus, he is doing what God wants him to do; and they are missing their own blindness, they are sinners too, like us all.

The Apostle Paul offers a personal illustration of this dynamic. In the reading from 1 Timothy, he refers to himself as the foremost of sinners. This is not hyperbole, nor is it false self-deprecation. Earlier in the text, he says he formerly was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. He was all of this and more. Until his Damascus Road experience, he had Christians persecuted and killed and was convinced that he was doing the right thing, what God wanted him to do in putting a stop to this false religion! So it often goes with the self-righteous and doctrinaire, they can do no wrong, they can acknowledge no frailty, and thus they cannot change until something alters their perspective.

So, there is a warning here - being unable to acknowledge frailty is not a virtue. Humility is. We cannot change until we acknowledge our need for it.

We also have to believe that change is possible and desirable. Sometimes we give up on ourselves. We feel like we have tried to change and haven't been able to do so. Other times our resistance to change is a cop-out. *This is just how I am. I have a bad temper. I just hold on to things, I can't let go.* Or worse — *boys will be boys, it's just locker room talk.* What all this really means is — *I don't want to change or I won't make the effort to do so.*

Repentance depends on acknowledgment of the need for change and belief that it is possible and desirable. The latter part of this is important. We tend to think of repentance in negative terms, confronting something undesirable and perhaps even embarrassing in our lives, and this is part of the story. But the more important part is living toward

something better. Frederick Buechner put it this way. “True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ than to the future and saying, ‘Wow!’” (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 79). That is the nature of repentance, but we have to believe a better future is possible.

The absence of such belief is what I find most disheartening in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Demon Copperhead*, though it is an accurate portrayal of the dual demons of poverty and addiction in Appalachia. The characters who become immersed in a self-destructive and self-defeating way of life genuinely don’t believe that something better is possible, and there are plenty of reasons why they don’t believe. I read a book like this and want to will the characters to find a way to a better life, but it is a rare occurrence. In the real world, it takes education, emotional support, opportunities, and systemic interventions to empower people... but the people also have to believe in the possibility of change.

So it goes with all change. There is an upside to repentance, it envisions better things for us, but we have to embrace them.

Yet there is one other thing that needs to be said about change — we don’t achieve it alone. The grace of God makes it possible.

Theologian Walter Wink once said that three things are simultaneously true — the world is good, the world is fallen, the world is being redeemed by a God of mercy and grace. This is true of our lives. We are inherently good, beloved children of God, worthy of divine favor. We are also flawed in nature, destined to come up short, not necessarily born in sin, as a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip argued, just quick studies. Yet God is at work for good in our lives, and God is persistent, God has a way of getting what God wants.

In the parables Jesus tells, a sheep does not wander back by itself, nor does the coin appear in the woman’s hand. The shepherd finds the sheep, the woman finds the coin, both represent God seeking the lost.

The Apostle Paul does not decide to repent on his own. Saul, as he is known then, is on his way to Damascus to find more Christians to persecute, when the Spirit of Christ confronts him. Paul is startled, made blind for three days, a sign of his spiritual blindness, but in the end, he comes to understand who Jesus is and his life is transformed.

Unimaginable change happens. This foremost of sinners becomes a pivotal leader in the early church. But Paul does not do it alone.

Nor do we. We need help to confront our need for change, we need the grace of God, and the good news is God extends grace in many ways. Baptism is one of them. It is a sign of grace, an experience of God's love which frees us to practice the kind of repentance Buechner described, to turn toward something better.

God also extends grace by enabling us to recognize what matters most. A mentor of mine used to say there is just the right amount of guilt in the world; it just needs to be redistributed. Our minds go to the contrast between people who are hypersensitive to their shortcomings and people who are oblivious to the ways they run over everyone else's feelings. The people who feel guilty are not the ones who should. But the need for redistribution also applies to our lives. We may feel guilty but not about the things that matter most. God can redirect our focus.

Yet, most of all, God helps us to change by surrounding us with love. I think of Robert De Niro's character Rodrigo Mendoza in the film *The Mission*. Rodrigo is like the Apostle Paul in many ways. He is feisty and stubborn. He has a past that is not very noble. He has been a slave trader in 18th-Century South America, and he has killed his own brother in a fight over their shared love of a woman. This latter act leads to such guilt and remorse that he wants to die, but a Jesuit priest, Father Gabriel, convinces him that God still has a purpose for him, serving among the Guarani people he has been taking as slaves.

Rodrigo knows his condition and insists on a painful process of penitence, carrying heavy weight on his journey through streams and up mountains. Yet in the end, it is the unrelenting love of Father Gabriel, the other Jesuits, and the Guarani, reflecting God's love, that gets to Rodrigo. He remains a feisty, stubborn soul, and at the end of the film, he takes up arms to defend the Guarani, despite Gabriel's plea for nonviolence. But there is no question that he is changed by love.

This is how we change. It is difficult, but it is possible, with God's help. When we realize we are surrounded by love, no matter what, it is easier to acknowledge our frailty, imagine something better, see what changes are most needful, and then find the will to make them.