

“Let’s Roll”

Sermon – March 30, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

After 40 years of wandering the Israelites have finally crossed the Jordan into the Canaan, “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Yet, all who started the journey from Egypt are dead, except Joshua and Caleb. It is a new generation that has known only the wilderness.

As a renewal of their covenant, God tells Joshua to circumcise this new generation of Israelites. Well, the men anyway. Then “The LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.’ And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.”

So begins today’s First Testament passage from Joshua 5 verse 9. It’s an odd place to start the lectionary passage because it’s really the end of this previous passage.

“Gilgal” means a “circle” or “rolling” in Hebrew. So here it signifies a new beginning for the Israelites in the Promised Land. You could say the name “Gilgal” represents the idea of a “rolling away” of their old life of slavery in Egypt and/or of the disobedience of the previous generation in the wilderness.

And then today’s passage is about celebrating the Passover again and that they no longer would eat the manna in the desert but now real food from the land.

It sounds like the happy ending to a long journey. Except that they are entering a land that already has people. And they will war with them to take their land. It’s not a story we like to tell: a people conquering other people because God told them to. A story and justification our European ancestors used in conquering this land; our “manifest destiny.”

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But the compilers of the bible kept all the stories—the good, the bad, the ugly—for us to deal with. They didn’t white wash their history to make it so everything was in a positive light.

It’s a tricky thing combining religion and politics. As 17th-century French mathematician, philosopher, and theologian Blaise Pascal said, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

The Apostle Paul found internal conflict over religious convictions at the church in Corinth. Some more charismatic and hardcore believers were convincing people that Paul was weak because he was too forgiving and gracious when he was with them.

To Paul’s way of thinking their ministry is indistinguishable from Satan’s in part because it looks like the church has started to admire their moral absolutism.

We have Christians today who would identify with those Corinthians. Ironically, in a world in which we so easily fall into literal, fundamentalistic readings of scripture, doctrine, and practice, we equally easily minimize the radical implications of Paul’s claim.

Today’s passage from 2 Corinthians 5 is part of Paul’s argument that in Christ we are a new creation and are ambassadors for Christ therefore we should act accordingly and be reconciled to God—and by implication with each other.

Requisite for becoming people of God is a process of reconciliation and change. Through Christ, God makes this change possible.

What is reconciliation? The Greek word for it could be translated as “radical change.” It also has the connotation of changing enmity to friendship,

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hostility to favor. When Paul is arguing for people to be reconciled to God, he is arguing that they should remove any barriers to their radical change and restoration of a favorable relationship with God.

For many Christians, hopes of new life and new creation through Christ are crucial. Yet Christians often allow for this hope for themselves while not really wanting it for others.

The idea of one’s neighbor needing to change to “get right with God” is easier for many to imagine than having to change themselves or change their own perspectives on their neighbor.

In other words, we are often happy to work toward reconciliation with our neighbor when they have to change, but not when we also must change.

According to Paul, it means that those things that were important, when we lived in the “old” flesh, are no longer to be of importance to us.

We are not to focus on those things that separate us from one another; those elements of “the flesh” bring about conflicts and disputes. When we are new creations, we become one with each other. Just as nothing will separate us from the love of God, so too should nothing separate us from each other.

Which brings us to the gospel lesson. We generally call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son—except the word “prodigal” never shows up and there are two sons.

Probably the only time you use the word “prodigal” is in the idiomatic phrase “Ah, the prodigal son returns” where we humorously mean someone who has gone off to do their own thing and has now returned.

“Prodigal”, though, actually means wastefully extravagant, lavish, or abundant. So, in the story we think of the younger son as being “prodigal”. He gets

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all of his inheritance—while his father is still alive, mind you—and lives high on the hog until things take a downturn and he falls to the low of feeding the pigs.

He decides to return to his father more out of desperation than repentance. By all rights he should have been an outcast and his father casting him out when he returned. Instead, the father treats him like royalty—literally: a robe, ring, sandals, the fatted calf, music, dancing, celebrating.

Then we have the elder son, out working in the fields as he has probably done every day while his brother was out partying till the cows came home. He learns—from a slave, no less—about his younger brother. He is incensed. He works hard, always obeys his father, and gets nothing special. His younger brother not only had the gall to ask for his inheritance while his father was alive but then wastes it all on wine, women, and song. And then comes home with his tail between his legs and is not only accepted but celebrated.

We often think of the elder son as maybe being a bit self-righteous. Isn’t he being a bit “prodigal” himself, wasting all he has in in self-pity?

Maybe. But really, wouldn’t we all be like that? Some righteous indignation?

Where is the fairness? Where is the justice? Why is bad behavior being rewarded, even extravagantly so, and good behavior gets not so much as a “thank you”?

The father is prodigal with his love. Yes, the younger son didn’t deserve the royal treatment; he didn’t earn it. But are things “better” if he is outcast? He did return after all, even if not truly repentant. And the father understands the anger of the elder son; he is as compassionate to him as he was the younger son. He simply points out the elder son has lost

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nothing and, in fact, has everything and will inherit everything. But the son can't be resentful at the father's prodigal love and in fact must share it. The love of the father is prodigal by any standards, just as God's love is for us. The elder son crystallizes questions about who has the rights to enjoy benefits as a member of God's family. Is this what grace looks like? Is God's grace a grace so eager to give and restore? Is it not dangerously permissive? For some Christians, including some of those Corinthians and some people today, the expression of divine love also evokes resentment in those who assume that they know all about it and claim to know who is worthy of it, and who is not, analogous to the elder son.

Jesus deliberately left the story open-ended. We do not hear if the younger brother truly repents and if there are any consequences for his behavior. We do not hear if the elder son relents and reconciles with his brother. All we know is the father loves both the prodigal sinner and the responsible saint.

Jesus wants us to fit ourselves—as individuals and as a community—into the story and act out the ending. Are we as individuals, as the church, as Christians ecumenically willing to welcome the sinners who respond to Christ's message? Or do we refuse to join the party and celebrate with the repentant sinners?

We are now a new creation. As God rolled away the disgrace of Egypt from the Israelites, so Jesus has rolled away sin from us through his prodigal love for us. Now we are to share that prodigal love by “radical change” by reconciling ourselves and others to God and thereby to each other.

Let's roll. In the name of the God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.