

"Fixing the Unfixable"  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

March 6, 2016

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

When something is broken, we naturally try to fix it. It may be a toy, an article of clothing, or something around the house (like a faucet or a light fixture). Some can get pretty good at fixing things. It makes us feel good about ourselves. We may get to the point of thinking we can fix most anything given enough time and effort. Maybe we think we can do the same thing with God – fix things with Him.

But why do they need fixing?, you may ask. It's because our relationship with God was broken and God didn't break it. God created Adam and Eve to live in a perfect relationship with Him. Adam and Eve broke that relationship with Him by disobeying Him. We do the same. Not only do we inherit that broken relationship but we keep it broken by disobeying God's commands in our thoughts, in our words, and in our deeds, by the wrong we have done and by the good we have left undone.

But that doesn't faze us one bit. Being the fixers that we are, we think we can fix the situation and make the relationship right again. Each of us probably has our own plan as to how to do it. First, we might admit we are wrong. After all, we are "only human" and "no one is perfect. Second, we might try and show a little humility to impress God. Thirdly (and this is the big thing), we try to make up for the bad things we've done by doing even more good things. We think that if we just avoid the really big sins (or cut down on them) and do enough good things (especially super good things), then we can fix our relationship with God. We will impress God enough with our behavior or, at least, our effort, so as to accept us back.

There's only one problem that many don't know or refuse to believe and that is this: a relationship with a holy God is based on holiness. In other words, God requires more than our best effort or a majority of our thoughts, words, and deeds to be good. He requires perfection. How much good must you do after sinning to attain perfection? Well, how many questions do you have to answer correctly in a test at school to get a 100% after answering the first one wrong? How many perfect games can you roll in bowling after getting an open in the first frame?

The answer is: you can't do it. You cannot fix your relationship with God, no matter how hard you try. Even if you add a little religious behavior – being a church member and showing up for worship every once in a while – won't change anything. Whatever plan you have will fail. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus tells a story to show how that relationship can be fixed.

It's a story about a man who had two sons. The younger son was certainly a piece of work. He begins by asking his father for his share of the inheritance. Since an inheritance is usually given only when someone dies, the younger son is essentially telling his father, "You are of more value to me dead than alive."

Amazingly, the father, out of great love for this son, agrees to this proposition. Since wealth was measured by land and animals and not by cash in the bank, it meant the father had to sell off land and livestock to meet his son's demands, an action that would impoverish him and humiliate him before the village.

The son takes the money from the sale and leaves town. He was a pariah in the town by that time. He goes to a far away country and further shows what he's like by wasting all of his money on prostitutes, partying, drunkenness and other wild living. When a famine hits the land, he ends up with no money and no friends. He takes a job of feeding pigs, something no good Jewish man would ever do. But then again, he was no good Jewish man. He was as sinful as they come.

As he lay there starving in the pig pen, thoughts of his father came to mind. He devises a way to save himself from starving to death by coming up with a plan to repair his relationship with his father. First, he would admit that he was wrong: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." Second, he would add a bit of humility by saying, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Thirdly, he would make a deal with his father, "Treat me as one of your hired servants." This would accomplish three things. It would show his father that he was sincere and no longer a jerk. It would get him fed since he would have a job. And it would give him a way to earn money in order to pay back his father for what he had wasted and, by doing that, hopefully repair and restore the relationship.

It seemed to be a fool-proof plan and soon the young man was heading for home. But, before the plan could be hatched and the deal made, while he was yet far off, his father saw him. Rather than ignoring him, sending him away, or sending servants to retrieve him, the father, out of great love, gives up all dignity and hikes up his robes and runs out to meet him, something wealthy men in the mid-east NEVER did at that time. The father embraced his son and kissed him. This was not merely an emotional thing. This was a family greeting which showed that the father had already welcomed the prodigal son back into the family before and apart from anything the son or his plan could do.

The son did try his prepared speech out on his father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But he never tries to make the deal. Some think that his father interrupted him and didn't allow him to speak. I think it's more likely that he was simply overwhelmed by grace. He expected to be regarded as a slave, but, instead, he was fully received as a son.

The father then demonstrates that the relationship has been fully fixed. He gave him the best robe, signifying his place in the family. He gives him a ring to show he has the authority of the family. He had shoes put on his feet to show that he was a free man because slaves did not wear such things. Finally, he called for a fellowship meal to celebrate the restored relationship, not only with the family, but with the community as well.

This story of absolutely outlandish love shown to someone who in no way deserved it in order to fix what seemed to be a totally unfixable relationship is a picture of God and how He acts toward you and me. When our sins oppress us (as they should before a holy God) and when our relationship with God concerns us (as it should), we may try to make a deal with Him by cleaning up our act and trying to do better so that we have peace for our souls and hope for the future.

But before we can come to God and make our deal, God comes to us with unbridled joy and limitless love. Like the father in the story, God comes to us in most undignified way. Instead of coming as the Creator of the universe with power and might, He comes as a tiny baby with weakness and humility. Instead of requiring our lives from us as payment for our sin, He gives up His life on the cross as a sacrifice for all sin. Instead of rejecting us, sending us away, and having nothing to do with us, He comes to us alive from an empty tomb to embrace us with His love and show that He has accepted us back and has repaired the relationship between us.

Like in the story, that's not all. He gives us the robe of Christ's righteousness in baptism. We are part of God's family. We live in relationship with Him without worry or doubt. He gives us the ring of Christ's authority in His Word. We have the authority to forgive the sins of others and claim Christ's forgiveness for ourselves. We have the shoes of Christ's freedom. We are free to live in our relationship with our Heavenly Father without fear or guilt by loving and serving our neighbor. Our God throws a party for us by hosting a supper for us and all who have been found, received, and accepted by Him. The Lord's Supper is a time to celebrate, to receive His forgiveness anew, and to rejoice for and with all who have received it as well. You don't have to fix your relationship with God. He has already fixed it with you through His Son, Jesus Christ and He will never break it. No longer do you have to live like the younger son in our story, wracked with guilt or plagued by worry over your father's attitude towards you. Your Heavenly Father loves you with a love that far exceeds even the love of father in the story. Our Father's love is perfect, complete, and eternal. Therefore, live with the unending joy and the perfect freedom which that relationship with Him brings.

Fixing things may indeed be fun. We might even become very good at it. We can save a number of things by fixing them. However, things may break again. There may be things that we just can't fix, no matter how good we might become. And sometimes it may be no fun at all striving to fix unfixable things. But God has fixed the unfixable. He has welcomed us back into His family. He has given us His gifts. He celebrates with us through a special meal here every week. And all of this is merely a preview and a taste of what is waiting for us when we die. It doesn't get any better than this. Amen