
Lent: Give up resentment
Martin Grove United Church
March 31, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 15:11-32

Resentment is like a bag of potatoes. That's pretty clear, right? Shall we go for coffee now? No? Ok - I'll keep talking.

This Lent we are working around the dual themes of temptation and giving up something for Lent. And by giving something up for Lent, I do not mean simple things that will make no real difference to your life, like chocolate. I mean important things that may allow you to find new life. Important things that may help you connect with the peace of God in deep ways. Important things that many help you understand the term "resurrection" in a new way this year. In our society we often feel that our life would be better if we had more - like wanting more money. Or - as a completely random example - wanting a bass guitar to complement our guitar group. But in truth for most of us, what will make our lives better is usually NOT having more. For most of us the thing that would make our lives better is to have less. But less of the right things. You know, less of the things that weigh you down, like negativity, resentment, anger, feelings of superiority, feelings of inferiority. Giving up something for Lent actually makes good sense.

That's the third week in a row that I've opened the sermon with those words. I wonder if anything is percolating into our heads yet? I wonder if anything is percolating into our hearts yet? I wonder if anything is percolating into our lives yet? And I use of the word "percolating" intentionally. If you mix oil and water together, they will separate again all by themselves. Percolating - on the other hand is a process that - with coffee for example - changes both the coffee grounds and the water. Percolating is a process that is not reversible. Percolating means change and growth. Percolating takes longer than simply mixing, which is why Lent lasts for 46 days.

Two weeks ago we were invited to give up for Lent our need for control. Last week we were invited to give up for Lent our expectations. I don't know about you, but

for me this is starting to sound like a lot more work than just giving up chocolate. At this point, it might even be easier to give up coffee. Aren't we done yet? Easter is still weeks away. Can't we just turn the page on the calendar and pretend it's Easter already! Why does Rev. Paul have this fixation on spiritual growth and finding healing? Well, nothing really, except that little word, "resurrection". Nothing really, except finding new life. Nothing really, except our own need to find inner peace. Nothing really, except finding Christ in our midst. Nothing really, except for Jesus's words, "Peace I give you. My peace I leave with you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Nothing really, except everything that matters.

And yes, Easter is 3 weeks away. We can all expect an easy ride of palms and platitudes on Palm Sunday. So with a little luck we only have 2 more weeks to endure this dreary theme of going up something important for Lent. Thank God for that! Do you want a break? Do you really want me to simply implore you to give up chocolate for Lent. OK - let's forget about all that and just dig into the story from Luke that we just read. The classic story of ... well, I was going to say classic story about "the prodigal son", except that the story is not about the prodigal son. Not really.

The story is - in my translation - broken into 2 paragraphs. One long paragraph and one short one. The long paragraph is in fact about the prodigal son, giving a description of the wayward child who wastes their half of the family inheritance on "loose living" and then returns home hoping to be treated as a slave. The story gives us just enough glimpse of the details to allow us to put ourselves into the story. The father assigns a different meaning to the return of the son, proclaiming that what was lost is now found, and that therefore we should celebrate. That's good news, right? How can the story NOT be about the prodigal son? There are many good reasons why I don't think the story is about the prodigal son at all.

First of all, the story is a parable, and a moralistic one at that. We have to assume that the meaning of the parable is found in the shorter final paragraph, not the longer opening preamble. If the story is about the younger son, why have the final paragraph at all?

Secondly, the parable is told in response to something. If we read the whole of

chapter 15 in Luke we get the whole picture. In the opening verses, the pharisees are blasting Jesus because Jesus “eats with sinners” and hang out with people dispossessed by the Jewish religious community. And in response to this challenge, we get 3 stories back to back: the story of the lost sheep, the story of the lost coin, and finally, the story we call “the story of the prodigal son”. In all 3 cases, the point of the story is about our need to rejoice when what was lost is found. And if you want to find something, you have to search among the lost, which is why Jesus spent time with people that some considered “sinners”, and outcasts. You will never find the lost amongst people who think they are already found. You have to look somewhere else.

When the younger son returned, broke, starving, perhaps diseased, the father rejoiced because his lost son has been found. But what about the elder brother? The elder son is annoyed - to say the least. The older son’s version is the story is simple The father celebrates the return of the “worthless” son while never celebrating his faithful older son and the older son declares - with some justification I might add - “it’s not fair!” The story is about a lost son, but which of them was lost anyway? In many respects the older son is more lost than the younger son ever was.

Question: The older son clearly holds a lot of resentment. But of whom? Is the older brother mainly annoyed at his brother for being an idiot, or at his father?

I would guess that the older son resents both his brother and his father. But the primary resentment is clearly towards his father. If the older brother was mainly resentful of the younger brother, he would storm into the house and confront his brother directly while the party was in full swing. Instead the story reveals that the older brother mainly resents his father.

Question: What is the older son resentful about? No! I do not think the resentment is because the father is - today - throwing a party for the younger brother. The main resentment is actually an old resentment that has never been dealt with. Yes, the flash-point in the story is that the father is presently giving the younger son a party, but very quickly the accusations drift into the past. The older son says, “you have never given me a young goat”. The older son reveals long-held resentment. The charge that the father never gave a young goat to the older son would have been true even if the younger

son had never left home. And because the older son is holding a resentment from the past, he misses out on the party that was happening right then.

The story we call “the prodigal son” is not about the prodigal son at all. It is about the older son, and it is about the challenge that many of us face when we think that life is not fair for us. It’s about holding expectations that - over time - lead to holding resentment. Clearly, the older son should give up holding resentment for Lent. Well look at that, we ended up back at giving something up for Lent. Who would have guessed it! I guess I will go with the flow and suggest that this Lent, we should all give up resentment. I tried to change the theme, but I failed. Sorry! Better luck next week!

So now we all know why resentment is like a bag of potatoes, right? No? Not yet? OK, I’ll keep talking.

Whether or not you agree with me that the story is about the older son, I’m sure we can at least agree that the story is about resentment. Resentment is a state of being in pain because we feel we have been mistreated. Or perhaps we resent ourselves because of our own actions or inactions. Resentment also comes when we do not speak our own truth because we are afraid of consequences. When our truth does not get expressed, it gets turned back inside, becomes internalized, and ferments into resentment. There are other causes of resentment, but the root of resentment is an unwillingness for us to forgive others or ourselves.

When we withhold forgiving other people, it sometimes gives us the idea that we are in control. I mean, we are the ones who are choosing not to forgive, right? We are in the driver’s seat, right? And that might even work if the other person was begging us for forgiveness, grovelling at our feet. But that’s a delusion, because when we choose to withhold forgiveness it is almost always about an issue that nobody else is even thinking about. We are the only ones loosing sleep on this. Even worse, strong resentments are ALWAYS about something from past experiences that are infiltrating our present because we have not dealt with them - just like in the story of the prodigal son where the older son’s resentment was actually a very old resentment that was poisoning his present, and because of which the older son was missing a good party. This is why numerous people have taken credit for the old quote that says, “Resentment is trying to kill other people by

drinking poison yourself”.

By now it must be obvious why resentment is like a bag of potatoes, right? If you still don't know, get a large bag of potatoes and carry them around with you everywhere you go. Don't eat them, sell them, or get any value at all from them, just carry them around. Because that's just like resentment. Resentment is something that we carry around with us everywhere we go, that we don't eat, or sell, or get any value at all from, we just carry resentment around. But guess what. You can put a bag of potatoes down. And you can put your resentment down too.

If that's too scary for you - you are probably quite attached to your resentments - open the bag and just take some of them out. Taking out even 1 or 2 potatoes will make a difference. Putting down 1 or 2 resentments will make a big difference.

Like the older son, when we fail to deal with our resentments we miss the party that is happening right here and now. What resentment do you need to put down, who do you need to forgive for you to freely celebrate life today?

As the saying goes, “Forgive others, not because they deserve it, but because you deserve peace.”

Peace be with you.

Amen.