
Lent: Give up your resentment
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 15:11-32

[image: resentment is like a sack of potatoes]

Resentment is like a sack 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 up something for Lent, I do not mean simple things that will make no real difference to our lives, like chocolate. I mean important things that may allow us to find new life. Important things that may help us connect with the peace of God in deep ways. Important things that may help us understand the word "resurrection" in a new way this year. In our society we often feel that our lives would be better if we had more - like wanting more money. Or - as a completely random example - me wanting a new bicycle with hydraulic disc brakes. 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. Less of the things that weigh us down. Less of things like negativity, resentment, anger, being judgemental, feelings of superiority, feelings of inferiority. Or perhaps something else that is causing you pain. Giving up something for Lent actually makes good sense.

[image: percolating]

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. It's a good thing that Lent lasts for 46 days.

[image: aurora]

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. And the reflection title, “Lent: give up your resentments” sounds like we are not going to be encouraged to give up our resentments. I don’t know about you, but for me this is starting to feel like a lot more work than just giving up chocolate. At this point, it might even be less work to give up coffee. But I have no intention of finding that out. 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!

[image: rainbows and unicorns]

It’s the middle of Lent. Do you want a break? Do you really want me to simply tell you to just give up chocolate for Lent and then talk about rainbows and unicorns? OK - let’s forget about all this personal growth stuff and 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.

[image: iron maiden]

It gives a description of a wayward child who wastes their half of the family inheritance on “loose living”. And then returns home hoping to be treated at least as well as a slave. The story gives us just enough details to allow us to put ourselves into the story. The son returns home as a way of self-preservation. The father however assigns a

different meaning to the return of the son. The father proclaims 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 do not think the story is about the prodigal son at all.

[image: lost sign]

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. Consider this: If the story is about the younger son, why do we need the final paragraph at all? The story could have simply ended with, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate."

Secondly, the parable is told in response to something. If we read the whole of Luke chapter 15 we get a bigger picture. In the opening verses of the chapter, the pharisees are blasting Jesus for the usual reasons. 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. First, the story of the lost sheep. Then the story of the lost coin. And finally, the story we call "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.

[image: lost and found]

When the younger son returned, broke, starving, perhaps diseased, the father rejoiced because his lost son has been found. But what about the older brother? The older 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 the sons was lost? In many respects the older son is more lost than the younger son ever was.

[image: Question WHO is the older brother mainly annoyed at?]

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 is he more annoyed 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 resentful of the younger brother, he would have stormed into the house and confronted his brother directly while the party was in full swing. Instead the story reveals that the older brother mainly resents his father.

[image: Question WHAT is the older son resentful about?]

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 accusation 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. The accusation that the father never gave a young goat to the older son would have been true even if the younger son had never returned. The older son is living in the past by holding resentment. And because the older son is holding a resentment from the past, he misses out on the party that was happening right then.

[image: its not fair]

The story we call “the prodigal son” is not about the prodigal son at all. It is about the older son. It is about the challenge that many of us face when we think that life is not fair for us. It is about the challenge that many of us face when we think that we have followed the rules and we have not been rewarded for that. It’s about holding expectations that - over time - lead to holding resentment. Clearly, the older son should give up holding on to his resentment. Perhaps the older son would like to give that up his resentment for Lent. Well look at that, we ended up back at giving up resentment 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 sack of potatoes, right? No? Not yet? OK, I'll keep talking.

[image: holding anger]

Whether or not you agree with me that the story is about the older son, I'm sure we can at least agree that resentment is a big feature of the story. 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 often an unwillingness for us to forgive others or to forgive ourselves.

[image: resistance and resentment]

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 over this. Even worse, strong resentments are ALWAYS about things from past experiences that are ruining our present because we have not dealt with them. Just like in the story of the prodigal son. 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.

[image: drinking poison]

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". We sometimes hold resentments with that idea that that will force another person to change. But in fact we are the ones who end up changing. We become more bitter. We lose out on the blessings of life. We miss the party that is happening right in front of our own eyes.

[image: resentment is like a sack of potatoes]

By now it must be obvious why resentment is like a sack of potatoes, right? It you

still don't know, get a large sack of potatoes and carry them around with you everywhere you go. Do not eat them. Do not sell them. Do not exercise with them. Do not get any value at all from the potatoes. Just carry them around. Because that is 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. And the only exercise you get from carrying resentment is jumping to conclusions. But guess what. You can put a sack of potatoes down. And you can put your resentments down too.

[image: sunrise]

Now I know that the idea of putting down our resentments can feel scary. I mean, many of the resentments we carry we have been carrying for decades. We actually become quite attached to our resentments. Our resentments have helped shape our relationships. Our resentments have helped shape our view of the world. Our resentments help us feel that we are right all the time. Our resentments help us feel like we are in control. It does feel scary to put those resentments down. They are like a shield that we have been hiding behind. Perhaps you balk at the idea of putting down your resentments.

Well, I understand completely. But at least consider opening the sack of potatoes and taking out a few of them. At least consider putting down 1 or 2 resentments. Even that will make a big difference. It's Lent: give up your resentments. And if you don't know how to put down your resentments, reach out to me, or to trusted friends. My vision of church is a community where we help each other find peace in our own lives. I'm here for you. Just reach out.

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

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

Peace be with you.

Amen.