

Sermon: March 14, 2010

Scripture: Luke 15:20-24

Title: “ The Importance of Taking the First Step Toward Home”

Call to Worship: *adapted from Psalm 32*

Blessed is the person whose transgression
is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the person to whom the Lord
Imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit
There is no deceit.

I acknowledged my sin to thee,

And I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, “I will confess my transgressions
To the Lord”

Then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.

Therefore, let everyone who is godly offer prayer
to Thee;

Thou art a hiding place for me, thou preservest
Me from trouble; thou didst encompass
me with deliverance.

Many are the pangs of the wicked;

But steadfast love surrounds those who trust in God.

Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous;
And shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Hymns: # 2114 At the Font We Start our Journey

184 How Blest Are Those vs. 1,3,5

275 God of Our Life

Prayer of Confession: We seek you out in the solitude of this moment, O Lord, knowing that you already know what is on our hearts and minds. You know us like a book, and yet you call upon us to empty ourselves and lay bare our spirits. You know the times we have fallen short of your glory, and the moments when we have failed to love as Christ loved. You know how often we have looked at a beggar on the street corner and thought that he was running a scam, and so we transpose that skepticism onto others in need. You are aware of the tensions that exist within our families and the times we have been insensitive to the needs of our brothers and sisters. Forgive our incessant pride and our puffed up sense of self-worth. Turn our hearts toward home where you wait with open arms and words of love and forgiveness. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen

Profession of Faith: Brief Statement of Faith lines: 1-8, 27-28, 52-53, 77-80

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Title: “ The Importance of Taking the First Step”

George and Linda Williams had been married for 13 years. With two young children, they looked like the perfect couple. Both were successful in their respective professions and from all outward appearances they had a marriage made in heaven. But George and Linda knew that the outward appearance was simply a façade. After their second child was born, they had grown apart. George’s profession was not a 9 to 5 job. It required lots of evening hours and many weekends. Linda was left with the care of the children as well as building her own career. George did not understand Linda’s criticism, after all he was bringing home a nice salary plus commissions. And Linda began to build a wall around herself. And slowly, they grew apart. Even getting up and taking the children to Church on Sunday morning became a chore. It was so much easier to stay home and not face their friends.

George sensed what was happening to them. Linda realized that the old spark was missing from their relationship. Privately, each of them felt the gap growing; the lack of meaningful communications; the feelings of uncomfortableness when they were together. And they both knew that the downward spiral had to be stopped. But how? Who would take the first step. Which one of them would turn to the other and say, “we need to get some help.” What stood in the way? Their pride? Fear of what they would say to each other? Who knows what would happen if they opened up and shared their feelings. So there they stood, on the brink, unwilling to move, frozen in time and space, knowing that they needed to make a move, but..... will you know the feeling.

It’s that first step that is so difficult. You can know you have a problem. You can sense that things aren’t right. You can feel so totally uncomfortable that life is almost unbearable. But making that first move is like moving a mountain.

That’s the way it was with Steve Lester. When he enlisted in the Marines at age 19, he was a lean, mean, fighting machine. He could do 100 pushups without breaking a sweat, could fly through the obstacle course ahead of his squad and at 5’10, 165 pounds, he was all muscle. But that was years ago. Now, at age 54 he could hardly walk up a set of stairs without getting winded. Pushups were a thing of the past and the only obstacle course he could manipulate was the hallway from his bedroom to the stuffed chair in the den where he sat and watched TV all day. The picture of him on the wall in his uniform seemed like someone else. And he knew that he was going to have to change, or die. But making that first step seemed so difficult. His wife had been warning him. His children had begged him. His buddies down at the VFW had made fun of him as he put on the pounds. How could he shed the pounds? What could he do to start the process. He knew it would be a long hard fight, but he simply couldn’t bring himself to take that first step. Turning his life around seemed impossible.

Now, Ellen Beam was a pretty teenager. As a senior in high school, she was on the brink of bursting forth into a world of College and career. But it did not look like Ellen was going to get past high school graduation. In the tenth grade she had gone to a party with friends and someone had introduced her to crack. From there on it was down hill. Within six months she was in constant conflict with her mom. Her father had left them for greener pastures several years ago, and Ellen blamed her mom. She missed her father. Perhaps the crack became a substitute for her father. She always felt great when that stuff was working inside her. It was the inbetween times that were horrible. Throughout her eleventh grade her grades slid downward. And now as a senior, it was doubtful if she would graduate with her class. Her mother had carried her to counselors. The school counselor had attempted to befriend her. Some of her classmates had even attempted to talk to her. They could see where she was headed. Most of the time she sat in class with her head down. On the one hand she knew what was happening to her and she didn't like it. But on the other hand the drugs were so powerful that she simply could not take that first step of going without. She knew she needed to make a complete break before they killed her, but knowing and doing are two different things.

The prodigal was living in squalor. The pigs he tended ate better than he. It hadn't always been this way. Back home when he was a boy, he lived comfortably. Out in the world, living off his inheritance, it had been good. But now, that was all gone and he was destitute. He was lucky to get the job in the pig sty. He was beginning to smell like the pigs. For a Jewish fellow, this was unbearable. "We don't even eat pork", he thought to himself. "Why am I tending pigs for these gentiles? I am lower than dirt." Then the thought entered his mind. "The servants at my father's house live better than this. I'll go back home and beg my father to let me be one of his servants." But in order to do this he would have to confess to his father how he had sinned against him and against God as well. "Can I do that", he thought to himself? "Can I put my ego aside and confess my sinfulness? How can I face my brother? I can see the sneer on his face. What will I say to the servants who used to wait on me now that I am one of them. No, I cannot do that. But I need to go home. I need to confess. I need to start over. What are the ramifications of my not going? More destitution... perhaps even death. And what are the pitfalls of going home? Humiliation and snide comments. What do I do?"

And the scriptures say: "And he set out for his father's house."

What is it that enables us to set out on a new course of action? What empowers us to change from a way of life that is not healthy to one that is? How can we take that first step from a way of life that, even though it may be destructive, is familiar. George and Linda Williams needed to take the first step toward healing their marriage. Steve Lester needed to take that first step toward a more healthy life style. Ellen Beam desperately needed to change her life and take the step away from crack to a drug free life. The Prodigal did it. If he hadn't he would have spent the rest of his life with the pigs, and that may not have been a very long life.

Let me suggest that there is a power which each of us can access to help us take that first step. It is the Grace of God. By the Grace of God the Prodigal came to his senses and he

set out for his father's house. By the Grace of God, George can be empowered to turn to Linda and say, Let's get some help. By the Grace of God, Steve can find the strength to change his eating and exercise habits which will result in a new lease on life. And it is equally true that The Grace of God can empower a crack addict to get clean.

Now, I know that simply saying that the Grace of God can make it happen, won't make it happen. God's Grace is almost always expressed through others who have experienced that Grace in their lives. It can happen spontaneously, as with the Prodigal. But more often than not, it happens when you and I, who have felt God's Grace in our own lives, take the opportunity to share that grace with those who are stuck in places that are full of darkness and despair. So, one day George and Linda's best friends, Susan and Tony Lindahl, invited them over to dinner. And while their kids were out in the back yard playing on the trampoline, Susan and Tony shared with George and Linda the story of how they had come to the brink of divorce, only to discover how much they still loved each other when they attended a Marriage Enrichment Seminar at their church. The four of them talked till way after dark, and when George and Linda left their friends house, they had taken the first step toward healing. God's Grace was at work.

Steve Lester got a phone call one day from an old Marine buddy. He was passing through town and wanted to drop by. At first Steve was apprehensive, but finally agreed to see him. When his buddy arrived, it was obvious that he too had been through some changes. They talked about the feelings of depression both of them experienced after they left the Marines. They talked about how they dealt with that depression: Steve by eating constantly and becoming a couch potato and the friend by drinking himself to sleep each evening. But now, his buddy was on the wagon. He was in a regular exercise program and had begun to take some computer courses at the community college. He invited Steve to go to the gym with him. It was a big first step, but by the grace of God Steve made that step, and is now down about 35 pounds. But it is still a struggle to not go to the refrigerator every time a commercial shows.

Ellen Beam's story is a little different. She discovered that as long as she hung around with the same people who introduced her to crack, she was never going to get straight. But if she did not have them as friends, she would be friendless, and that was more frightening than staying on Crack. One afternoon after school, she was headed for the picnic shelter down at the park where her "friends" hung out and wasn't paying much attention to the street light at the corner. She walked out in front of an oncoming truck. A kid from the eleventh grade walking about three paces behind her saw what was happening and quickly grabbed her coat and pulled her back. Both of them sat down on the curb frightened almost to death. When they finally caught their breath, the young boy asked her if she would be interested in attending a concert at his church that Friday evening. Without even thinking she responded "yes" and that was the beginning of a whole set of new relationships that gave Ellen the courage to cut her ties with old friends and old habits. God's Grace comes in strange ways.

Think now about something in your life that needs changing. Perhaps you have made little attempts to change, but always failed. What would it take to empower you to

change some habit, or some behavior, or some attitude that isn't beneficial to you and may even be harmful? Do you know that you don't have to take that first step alone. You have the Grace of God as your strong right arm. You have the knowledge that God only wants the best for you. And then add to that knowledge the understanding that somewhere in God's Church there is someone who has faced the same situation you have faced and is just waiting to become your partner.

Now, turn it around. Here's part of the story of the Prodigal Son you have never read.

Now the younger son lived in the home of his Father until his father died. He became his brothers overseer and helped the older brother to enlarge the farm and turn the winery into a successful business. He never resented that his brother inherited the farm. And he was often found at the synagogue teaching the young boys the Torah, and taking them on outings along the Jordan river, teaching them about the love and forgiveness of God. And even the servants realized that this young man was a new person since he returned from the far country.

You see, when we take that first step to return home, to change, to renew our lives, to do whatever God is calling us to do, we are moving toward a life where God's Grace will shine in us. Amen.

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