

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
March 10, 2013

2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15: 1-3, 11b - 32
"Into the Abyss"

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent. We are three weeks closer to Good Friday when we recall and commemorate Jesus' death on the cross. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthian church, nudges us on the journey.

I shall go to Paul's theology through an excellent documentary movie called "Into the Abyss." The popular movie review website, Rotten Tomatoes, offers this summary:

"In his fascinating exploration of a triple homicide case in Conroe, Texas, master filmmaker Werner Herzog probes the human psyche to explore why people kill – and why a state kills. In intimate conversations with those involved, including 28-year-old death row inmate Michael Perry (scheduled to die within eight days of appearing on-screen); Herzog achieves what he describes as 'a gaze into the abyss of the human soul.'

"Herzog's inquiries also extend to the families of the victims and perpetrators as well as a state executioner and pastor who've been with death row prisoners as they've taken their final breaths. As he's so often done before, Herzog's investigation unveils layers of humanity, making an enlightening trip out of ominous territory."

As you can imagine, it is a harrowing movie. Michael Perry is interviewed by the film-maker from behind a bullet-proof glass wall. Through DNA samples and thorough investigation, it is absolutely certain that Perry and a friend killed a woman, her son and her son's friend and then stole a sleek, red Chevy Camaro from the women's garage. Bizarrely, it was all for the car.

Throughout Herzog's interview, Perry smilingly claims a relationship with God and states that he would either get a reprieve or join God in heaven. This is juxtaposed with the sorrowful expressions of the daughter and sister of the deceased and by the bewilderment of the community.

At no point does Perry accept what he clearly did and thus he never admits what he clearly did. Maybe he was advised by a lawyer but in doing so he does a disservice to himself and others. He deprives himself of the release and freedom he would have in Christ, the opportunity to clear himself from what must surely have bothered him in the middle of the night. There's no remorse and no attempt to seek God's forgiveness which he surely would have received and the daughter's forgiveness which she may have or may not have given.

It is here that we reach Paul and his entreaty to the Corinthian church. He writes, "...we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Perry's relationship to God, while a comfort in his state of denial, never met Paul's criteria. It is never shown that he named the sin that he could name before God in Jesus. In this version of the atonement, no doubt intended by Paul as one steeped in Hebrew religion, Jesus willingly goes to the cross as the sacrificial lamb given on behalf of the people's sin as a requirement for reconciliation with God.

This reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus who took humanity's sins upon himself works for Perry and for anyone who wants to be free from burdens of sin. Sin is estrangement from God and from humanity expressed in violent, non-caring, mean, vindictive and abusive behavior. We know the litany. Paul wraps his words around the concept of reconciliation which is compassion, caring, peace and justice. It is newness of life as Paul writes: "...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

I make no judgment about Perry's life with God. He is executed during the run of the movie. From what we are shown it certainly seems he missed a real opportunity and the world is less for it.

From Paul we go to the gospels and discern the Lenten promptings there and find an explicit answer for Perry. The theme of sin continues. The passage begins: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus replies with a few parables, the last the famous prodigal son or lost son story which is the subject of today's reading.

A young man, like Perry, blows his inheritance on dissolute living and when he hits rock bottom, eating with pigs, he comes to his senses and says: "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

The young man outlines the prerequisites for forgiveness: acceptance of his sorry state, humility and remorse. He gets up and goes home and does exactly what he promised himself. His father sees him from a distance and runs out to greet and embrace him and he tells his father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

This earthly father is an analogy for God. "The father said to his slaves. 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'"

Perry, Perry of Conroe, Texas, throw off the shackles from your heart and be free. Although the walls of prison enclose you and the execution chamber bids you, you will be freer than you have ever been in your life if you go to God like the prodigal son for you, Perry, are a beloved son of God as we all are: sons and daughters of God who forgives us and frees us from our sins, burdens and enslavement.

Perry, child of God, you are not excused, says author C. S. Lewis, you are forgiven. You will serve your sentence in a way, we hope, that is restorative and not retributive. However the cards fall in the Texas penal system know that when you go to God in true penitence you will be released from this burden and you will help stir the river of healing for others in this sad and painful affair.

Our neighbor in our condo spent years training inmates at San Quentin to be drug and alcohol counselors when they got out of jail. She speaks of profound changes that take place in prison when inmates admit to themselves and to God what they did and they receive forgiveness and peacefully and respectfully reach out to families and friends on both sides and work to change and improve their lives. Confession is good for the soul – anywhere and anytime.

After reading or hearing the prodigal son story one often wonders about the older brother who held down the fort and worked while his brother spent his life and all his money on dissolute living. We don't know the outcome but can only surmise that the younger brother made amends like they do in Alcoholics Anonymous and the father would have promptly thrown a party for his first son and friends.

The final words of the father are instructive though. He says: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

And so we continue our Lenten journey to the cross and resurrection. Amen.