

**Life, Death and This Ministry of Reconciliation**  
**Caldwell Presbyterian Church**  
**March 6, 2016**  
**Rev. John Cleghorn**  
**Texts: Luke 15:1-3; 11-24; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

God is a lousy accountant and God wants you to be one, too.

Now, I'm not telling you to cheat on your taxes. When you fill out your Form 1040 for the IRS and get to line 77, which says "Amount you owe," you pay that amount. Don't tell your accountant or the IRS that your minister said it was OK to fudge a little.

When I say that God is a lousy accountant and that God wants us to do the same, I'm not talking about strict mathematics. I'm talking theology. This is more a be-in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world kind of thing. Be in the world and pay whatever taxes are due. But in your relationships, err on the side of the other, err on the side of grace. Because that is what God does with us every day.

This morning we are given one of the best known of Jesus' parables, the story of the Prodigal Son. You know it. A father has two sons. One asks for his inheritance and goes to the big city. Scripture says "he squandered" all his money, all he had in the world, in "dissolute living."

In short order, he goes from having it all to having nothing.

James Weldon Johnson was an African-American author, educator and lawyer. He helped launch the NAACP and was part of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 30s. He may be best known for the poem that became "Lift Every Voice," known as the Black National Anthem. In his book "God's Trombone," he included a sermon on the prodigal in poetic form. He began that sermon this way.

Young man –  
Young man –  
Your arm's too short to box with God.

In that sermon, Johnson remind us that the story of the prodigal is our story, too.

There comes a time,  
There comes a time,  
When ev'ry young man look out from his father's  
house,  
Longing for that far-off country.  
Young man –  
Young man –  
Smooth and easy is the road  
That leads to hell and destruction.  
Down grade all the way,  
The further you travel, the faster you go.  
No need to trudge and sweat and toil,

Just slip and slide and slip and slide  
Till you bang up against hell's iron gate.

So it was with the prodigal son. Fast living, fast women, fast money. Until he found himself so low he was fighting with pigs for scraps to eat. As Weldon wrote,

... not a hog was too low to turn up his nose  
At the man in the mire of Babylon.

And there, nose to nose with the hogs, the young man repented. He confessed his sin and rehearsed the speech he would make to his father upon returning home and asking for a job.

But he never got to make that speech, so swift and sudden was his father's forgiveness. No, before the son even got the chance to open his mouth, the father ran out to meet him, declaring for all to hear, "my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost but now he is found. Come let us celebrate."

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It seems the prodigal's father was the same kind of lousy accountant as the Lord. Another term for accountant is "one who reconciles," as in reconciling your checkbook. The word reconcile has two parts: "re," to look back, and "*conciliare*," which is Latin for "to bring together."

To look back and to bring together. That is what the prodigal's father did, isn't it? He looked back at what his son had done. He took full measure of his son's sin. Yet he found forgiveness.

O, were it so easy for you and me. How that goes against our human nature, especially when we've been done wrong. How we want people to "account for" their wrong. But that is our idea of accounting, not God's.

Reflecting on God's gracious, lousy accounting, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church at Corinth. As Steve Shoemaker has been teaching on Wednesday nights, the disciples there had treated Paul badly. They had turned to some new, self-appointed super-apostles, who claimed to have a special wisdom. But Paul didn't seek revenge, he didn't practice the earthly accounting that calls for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. No, Paul preached grace.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Paul continued:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation ....

"... this ministry of reconciliation."

Is there anything more that our world, our nation, our city needs than reconciliation ... the act of looking back in grace and bringing together in good faith?

Have we, in recent memory, ever been more divided, more polarized as a nation? In the race for President, we have Bernie on the far left, Cruz and Rubio on the right. Gov. Kasich is a calm voice in the storm but no one pays attention to him. And The Donald ... well, The Donald stands for whatever he thinks people want to hear.

We have all read the political pundits analyses. As a pastor, I've decided anxiety plays a big role in our national drama. We are a deeply, deeply anxious nation, and, in the right hands, anxiety can be used in dangerous and divisive ways.

Older generations are anxious about outliving their money. Boomers fear their kids won't have it as good as they did. Millennials are understandably anxious about finding a job and paying off college debt.

The poor are getting poorer. Many whites are anxious because they know their days in the majority are numbered. African-Americans have more than enough to be anxious about.

For some, the antidote is simple answers and shallow assurances. Build a wall. Ban the Muslims. Make America great again. For them, the drug of choice, our national form of Prozac, is Donald Trump. But when the drug wears off, they will wake up to find that it didn't work, that far, far more than simple answers and unrealistic promises is needed in these profoundly complex times.

What is needed is not a strong man who promises to protect one group from another. What is needed is reconciliation. What is needed is empathy. What is needed, as Dot Scoggins preached two weeks ago, is more "us" and "ours" and less "me" and "mine."

And what about our city of Charlotte? Last week, I was at a Mecklenburg Ministries meeting and we had a special visit from the mayor. She came to engage us in three urgent causes.

First, is the threat by our governor and General Assembly to repeal the anti-discrimination statutes recently passed by our city council to provide for equal protection for the LGBT community.

The second is the increased deportation of local immigrant youth and children. To date, 83 youth and children deported from America have been killed in gang and drug violence upon arriving at home in Mexico, Central or South America. But, according to those who would deport, the threat back home isn't great enough to grant them asylum.

The third issue on the mayor's mind was the recently reported imbalance in arrests of African-Americans for possession of marijuana in small amounts. Blacks are arrested three times more often than whites on that charge, the Observer recently reported.

There are no easy answers. Each of the mayor's three concerns brings with it its own set of complexities and challenges. But which would not be helped by a commitment to

reconciliation, a commitment to bring together all involved in an honest, calm, non-combative effort to see and honor the other's perspective?

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None of this is to say that reconciliation is easy. However high a calling it is, however essential to our faith, it rarely comes naturally.

Take the prodigal son's father, for example. He might have heard his son's confession and repentance ... and still sent him away. He might have said, "I gave you what was rightfully yours, and you wasted it."

Or, he might have taken his son on as a hired hand, as the son was prepared to propose. That would have been fair and square for both of them.

But the prodigal's father was a lousy accountant, too. His idea of reconciliation was not one that required all debts to be paid and all accounts to be zeroed out. The prodigal's father knew the kind of grace Paul showed to the Corinthians, who had rejected him:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

That is why, in this season of Lent, as we move toward the cross of Christ, we prepare to die with Christ, to die to our old selves, again and again and as many times as it takes, that we might stop trying to settle accounts, that we might stop trying to "get ours" at all costs, that we might learn to see and forgive the human frailty of our opponents, that we might, at least in human affairs, become as lousy an accountant as our God.

Isn't that what the cross stands for?

Isn't the cross God's sign of reconciliation, God's promissory note that all debts are paid, God's invitation to take us back in, just as the father took the prodigal back in?

Isn't that the paradigm of the cross – that the Roman's attempt to humiliate Christ in an agonizing death only gave birth to this movement that bears his name and likeness; that the very instrument of death is now our sign of new life?

And what are we to do with this new life? We are to be, as Paul charged the Corinthians, "ambassadors of Christ." As those entrusted with the message of reconciliation.

Last week, several members of the church gathered to talk about what Anne and I observed and learned at a recent church conference. Much of our conversation centered on how we, as people of faith, can become ever more empathetic, how we can put ourselves in another person's position, especially those who are different. White to black. Gay to straight. Rich to poor. Liberal to conservative. From those with power to those without.

How can we, those at the gathering asked, make Caldwell a more reconciled and empathetic community? How can we die to ourselves that, in new life, we might give life to others? That conversation, will no doubt, continue.

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In closing, as our nation's historians and journalists try to make sense of these times of chaos and uncertainty in America, some point back to the 1960s. That tumultuous decade included the tragedy and the triumph of the civil rights movement, the vanity and folly of the Viet Nam war, the assassination of some of our nation's greatest heroes and the explosion of sex, drugs and rock and roll.

In those times of sweeping social change and high anxiety, Presbyterians looked to the clear-eyed truth of today's reading in 2 Corinthians. As a people of faith, with today's scripture in mind, they gave us the Confession of 1967, which proclaimed that that generation stood "in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ."

Yet, remarkably, by the end of that volatile, violent decade, our nation found a symbol of unity – the successful mission to land on the moon.

Recently, in cleaning out my mom's home, I found a box of old newspapers, including this one, the special edition of the New York Times from the day of the first moon landing, July 21, 1969.

The headline reads: Men Walk on Moon. Astronauts land on plain; collect rocks, plant flag.

As people of faith, as ambassadors of Christ, we might ask: What is our moon shot?

As Caldwell church, where people come together across differences, we might ask: what will be our legacy? What would God have us do here and now as we bear witness to God's radical grace in an anxious age?

Isn't it to die to ourselves, that we might be true and authentic ambassadors of Christ? Isn't it, as with the moon landing, to plant the flag of reconciliation here and across our city, to claim these times for the reconciling God, that lousy accountant, who reclaimed us in Christ?

Amen