Last week, I shared with you the story of redemption about a man who rediscovered himself while spending nearly 20 years in State prison. Thanks to the prison ministry by one of our sister Presbyterian Churches, Mike found meaning and purpose once again through his rekindled relationship with God. This morning, allow me to share with you another man who also found himself and found God after spending time also in prison. We’ll called him Jose.

 I met Jose for the first time when I was serving as a Chaplain intern at the Lutheran (Now, NYU Langone) Hospital in Park Slope. Each morning I did my usual floor round on my assigned floor, checking on some of the residents there. I came across this young man “Jose” who was in his late 20’s or maybe early 30’s.

 I remember the first time I met Jose, he seemed to be a loner…didn’t want to speak to anybody, but something told me that this was the person that I needed to talk to that morning. By the look on his face, Jose was having some serious contemplation about his life…about his past, present, and his future. So I went over to introduce myself. I told him that we were not there trying to convert people but to simply offer any spiritual care as they might need.

 As I began to talk to Jose, I got to know a little more about his background. He opened up and started telling his own story and what’s on his mind...how he ended up in State prison and now in the hospital. He was looking forward to get back to his real life, but he was scared and excited at the same time. He felt that he needed to put his past behind and turned the page and start a new page all over again…and that’s a good thing! As he was telling me his story, I simply listened and acknowledged him while trying to be supportive and withholding any personal judgment.

 Jose further told me about his life-transformation moment – of how he discovered his faith while in prison, thanks to the work of the Prison ministry group, Jose started to attend chapel services and began to read the Bible on his own. He told me that during one of the chapel services, he felt a small voice was calling him to get down on his knee and pray. He didn’t know how to pray or what he should pray for, but he prayed, confessed, and thanked God for this “second chance” opportunity in life.

 Jose told me his most favorite verse was the one that we read earlier, from II Corinthians 5:17, ***“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old is gone and the new has come”*** and his favorite song was *“Amazing Grace”,* which we will sing later on. Jose believed that, by the grace of God, he too has become a new creation. He was particularly touched by the words of the 1st stanza,***“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”***

 Like the prodigal son story that we read earlier, Jose was lost but is now found – found by God. God reached out to Jose and he reached back and he did not want to let go. Jose was so grateful for his *“Second Chance”* in life.

 What happened to Jose can very well happen to anyone of us. Although our experience may not be as dramatic as Jose’s, nevertheless God’s act of grace and redemption happens in the form of minor miracles in our lives, sometimes we don’t even notice it when it happens. We all have sins and are in needs of God’s mercy through our repentance to God. **The Season of Lent invites us to do just that, through series of introspection, self-examination and reflection upon our personal relationship with God.**

 While speaking in front of a group of tax-collectors and sinners, as well as some self-proclaimed righteous Pharisees and scribes, Jesus used three metaphors consecutively to illustrate what God’s ultimate love and mission may look like in his relationship to the people. There was the parable of the Lost Sheep, the parable of the Lost Coin, and now the parable of the Prodigal Son. Each of these parables shed a glimpse of God’s magnitude of grace and love for us ALL, even to a point of risking the other 99 in order to save just one. That’s how special this LOVE is. All are valued and All are saved at the end.

 Even though God may be portrayed as a generous God, bear in mind that this does not mean the one being saved is worth any more than the other 99. But rather it is quite the opposite that we are ALL worthy in God’s eyes in light of God’s ultimate plan, hope, and dream in us!

 In the parable that we read earlier, which I’m sure many of us are familiar with, it also challenged us to think about who do we relate to the most, at any given moment? Do we see ourselves as the younger son who had the audacity to ask in advance for his share of the father’s inheritance and then went on to lavishly squander it all. What’s even worse, he shamefully begging his way back home and pleading for his father’s forgiveness and acceptance? Talk about a self-awakening and transformation.

 Or do we see ourselves as the older brother who claim to be righteous and faithful to the father throughout our lives, but expressed resentment and bitterness towards the younger brother. Instead of being grateful and appreciative of others, we complain and express our dissatisfaction. We easily point out the wrongs of others, but not of our own?

 Or do we see ourselves as the Father (or the Mother) who sees one of our own coming back from the “dead”, embracing him, forgiving him? We could’ve easily ordered to keep the gate shut and disown the younger son because he got what he deserved. Let him learn his “Tough Love” lesson the hard way.

 At any given time, we may find ourselves playing the role of any one of these three characters. If you were the younger son, the older son, or the father, would you have done or reacted the same way as they did in our parable today?

 We believe in a grace-full God, who’s willing to lavish his grace upon us, even though we do not deserve our “Second Chance” in life. We’ve rebelled against our Heavenly Father, thought highly of our own achievements while trusting in our own judgments. We’ve disrespectfully dared to ask for OUR shares of the Father’s inheritance and squandered God’s opportunities and resources extended towards us.

 Many biblical scholars have concurred that this parable really should be called the *Parable of the Loving Father*, and NOT of the *Prodigal Son*. The central focus of the story should NOT be on the Son, but instead on the redemptive act of the Father. The turning point of our story, I think, occurred in verse 17, when the younger son ***“came to himself”.* The younger son WOKE UP and SNAPPED out of it!** He began to realize what he was doing wrongly and humbled himself and sought forgiveness. In the *New International* translation, it’s translated as ***“when he came to his senses”.*** The irony of all of this was that there is only ONE place where he can return to. The only place he knew and the only place he belonged…and that’s is HOME - back to be with his Father. In essence, this was a home-coming party that the Father threw for his disloyal yet beloved son.The very first word that came out of the repented son was, **“*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”[[1]](#footnote-1)***

**Recognizing and admitting one’s own fault is probably one of the hardest things to do, and likewise forgiving and embracing someone else’s fault and shortcoming may be even harder.** It takes a great deal of courage and self-awareness to admit that we are not who we think we are and that we are flawed and “dysfunctional” people. We need to humble our hearts and return back to God once again.

 Our God is an embracing and redemptive God who would always give us a “Second Chance” to get back into life, just as Jesus reminded us that we should forgive others 70 times 7, not literally of course, but as whole-heartedly and as often as we should and as God has forgiven us!

 For *if anyone is in Christ, we are a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come![[2]](#footnote-2)* Because of what Christ has done ultimately on the Cross, we no longer are trapped in our own bubble of sins and false hopes, but rather, we are a FREE and liberated people who can stand confidently before God as God’s own righteous sons and daughters.

 Friends, our Heavenly Father is patiently waiting at the gate and longing to welcome us and put his arms around us and embrace us, even if we may have journeyed the wrong paths with our stubborn hearts and our self-centered ways like the younger son. We’ve demanded what we think we are entitled to as part of our inheritance to God’s kingdom, only to squander off our God given resources of time, money and talents. Nevertheless, we dare to come and ask God to take us back in, even though we do not deserve such unmerited grace. As Christ summed up his father’s condition of grace this way, *there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

 God delights in us when we seek God through our humility and humble repentance. God is willing to “turn the page” on us, and embrace us just as we are, with a renewed attitude and reconciling spirit. **We are the ambassadors of God’s grace and witnesses of God’s reconciling hope for humanity.[[4]](#footnote-4)**

 **The season of Lent challenges us to be generous and giving, not only with our confession towards God, but also our forgiveness towards others, just as God forgives us and embraces us.** Some of us may have broken and hurtful relationships with others that need to be amended, things that we might have regrettably said or done that have caused greater harm than good. Some of us might still be searching our way through the desert, only to search our way back to God, who generously reclaimed and redeemed us at the “Lost and Found”.

 In closing, I would like to share with you a poem called *“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.”* Perhaps the title of this poem might sound familiar to you. And you are right, we sang part of this as one of our hymns last week…#435 in our hymnal. It was written by Frederick William Faber in 1854. In this poem, the writer described the sovereignty of our God who, *unlike earthly rulers, demonstrates welcome, kindness, grace and mercy. All we need to do is have a simple faith that “rests upon God’s word.”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

The poem goes like this:

***“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” – Fredrick Faber***

*There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.*

*There is no place where earth’s sorrows
Are more felt than up in Heaven;
There is no place where earth’s failings
Have such kindly judgment given.*

*There is welcome for the sinner,
And more graces for the good;
There is mercy with the Savior;
There is healing in His blood.*

*There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this;
There is room for fresh creations
In that upper home of bliss.*

*For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.*

*There is plentiful redemption
In the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head.*

*’Tis not all we owe to Jesus;
It is something more than all;
Greater good because of evil,
Larger mercy through the fall.*

*If our love were but more simple,
We should take Him at His word;
And our lives would be all sunshine
In the sweetness of our Lord.*

*Souls of men! why will ye scatter
Like a crowd of frightened sheep?
Foolish hearts! why will ye wander
From a love so true and deep?*

*It is God: His love looks mighty,
But is mightier than it seems;
’Tis our Father: and His fondness
Goes far out beyond our dreams.*

*But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.*

*Was there ever kinder shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the Savior who would have us
Come and gather at His feet?*

1. *Luke 15:18-19* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *II Corinthians 5:17* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Luke 15:7* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *2 Corinthians 5:20* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ###  *Hawn, C. Michael,* ***History of Hymns: “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”*** *www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-theres-a-wideness-in-gods-mercy*

 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)