

Reconciliation Between Us
First Presbyterian Church, Waukesha
Sunday, February 12, 2017
Rev. Marty Coons

Last week, I had a dream. I'm sure we all have had this happen while we're sleeping. I usually don't remember mine. But once in awhile, the dream lingers and I ponder its message.

In my dream, I was attending a workshop, talking with others on break. Suddenly, a person ran up to me and said:

“Look at their skin! (pointing to the whole class) They are all encased in green! Don't you know that 65% of all people die of a heart attack?”

I woke up and wondered who was dying of a heart attack? Who should I warn and take to the hospital? But over the next few days, I began to wonder: was it a physical heart attack I was being warned about? Or instead, I wonder if my dream was about people dying of a spiritual heart attack?

Because my dream came back to me as I read our scripture for this morning from Deuteronomy 30:17-18: “I warn you, if you have a change of heart . . . you will most certainly die.” What a threat! Does God really mean to scare us by this scripture passage? Or is God trying to make us feel guilty?

No. My dream made me realize that this scripture reading has to be God's loving warning to us that changing from living God's way to living our own way could cause a spiritual heart attack. And, God is desperately trying to reach us, to help us regain our footing on the real pathway created by God, not the pathway of our own making where we stumble and fall, where we are in danger of dying of a spiritual heart attack.

What can all of this mean? Moses in Deuteronomy ends by saying: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you, life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying God's voice and holding fast to God, for God is your life and length of days.”

Well, but how could our way of living cause us to die of a spiritual heart attack? Jesus' words in Matthew this morning warn us to not swear, to not be hateful if/when getting a divorce, to not look at others with lust, to not be angry, to not insult anyone, to not take someone else to court, to not call anyone a fool. Wait a minute. No swearing? No hateful divorces? No desiring another lustfully? Not be angry? Not insult anyone? Not call someone a fool? That's just the kind of world we live in today, isn't it? OOOO. That must be why my dream was warning me about spiritual heart attacks. Because that is the world we live in, but God did not create God's people to live that way. And when we do, we become spiritually unhealthy. Changing our hearts to living our world's way instead of God's way must cause our spiritual arteries to clog, over time, and eventually, we succumb to a spiritual heart attack. Our spirituality is dead. Our connection to God is broken.

Wow! Is this a real problem? I have never thought of myself as in danger of a spiritual heart attack. But Jesus is certainly warning us. How do we treat this condition? What can we do to make ourselves spiritually healthy again?

Jesus offers an example in our scripture reading this morning: “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift to God.” You know, that reminds me of a story that Jesus told one time about a wasteful, using resources lavishly, prodigal son. I wonder what that younger brother would have said to his father and brother when he returned home, and what they said to him? Let's listen in to their conversations:

Older brother: “How could my younger brother do this to me?” Can’t you just hear the older son spitting that out to the Father? How could my younger brother go and waste everything, be so irresponsible and get into so much trouble, and then come back here? Nothing here belongs to him. I have worked my fingers to the bone to keep this household going. I have worked like a slave for you, Father. I have never disobeyed your command. And yet, you have never once celebrated me. Yes, all that you have, Father, you divided between us, but now his part is gone and do you expect me to just take him in and support him from my share? Better he should have been dead. I really never expected him to be found. And now you want me to forgive him? His return isn’t just for the moment, you realize that. He expects to stay here. I know it was his home. And you have made it welcoming to him by throwing a party and inviting all the neighbors. I will never forgive him. Let him move back in. I will hate him forever.

Father: My son, you want revenge. You should forgive.

Older brother: No, I want justice. I’m a good person. Do I need forgiveness? This son of yours treated you as if you were dead by asking for his inheritance. And now he’s back wanting more. He got everything that was his. And now he’s returned and a mooch besides.

Father: Yes, son, you want him punished. Of course he did wrong. But once, you truly loved him as your brother. If you truly loved him, remember this: real love doesn’t have to win by getting even. By refusing to celebrate, you are only making yourself miserable. Look at you, all angry and upset. Everything here is yours. When he asked for his inheritance, I gave it to him. I gave you yours, too. Don’t be so selfish now.

Older brother: Me? Selfish? I’m a good person. Remember that, Father.

Father: Yes, you’re a good person. But I want you to be more than that. I want you to be God’s person. I want you to be a loving, forgiving older brother. I forgive him. I forgive you, too.

Older brother: Father, what are you saying? You forgive me? I’m a good person. Do I need forgiveness?

Father: My son, your brother has lost his self-respect and his self-confidence. He has to live with the knowledge that his actions have hurt those he loves. He hurt me deeply, more than you will ever know, and I forgive him. But your lack of acceptance hurts me deeply, too. If you are only a good person, and not his brother, then you do need forgiveness. I forgive you, too.

Narrator: The Father, I’m sure, returned to the party. But after that, the Bible doesn’t tell us what happened. We can only imagine the brothers’ conversation. Would the older son reject or accept his brother?

Older brother: I’m sorry I didn’t come to your party and celebrate your return. It was just a little too much for me to take.

Younger brother: I felt hurt that you didn’t come to my party. I had thought about you so many times while I was feeding those pigs. I knew I didn’t deserve to come back. I humbly asked Father to forgive me. I didn’t think about asking you to forgive me, too. I know that you have been the one who has done all the work. I know that you have been the one to oversee our family’s farm. I know my actions have made it difficult for you and lowered our family’s status in the community. I just didn’t have anywhere else to go. I came back not even hoping that you would allow me to earn a living working as your household slave. I just wanted to be treated as a hired hand – someone you pay only if you have extra work. But I didn’t know that Father would put his robe and shoes on me and treat me as a son again. I haven’t been a son to him, you have. You deserved the celebration that I got. Please forgive me, my brother. I’m sorry for not being here all those years when you needed me. I’m sorry for hurting you.

Older brother: Well, okay. I do forgive you. I am relieved and happy that you are home. I have missed you so much. We all have. I am so grateful to God that you are alive and found. Please forgive me for being so angry. Let's work together, my brother. Let's let go of the past. Let's begin again now, today, and I'll explain to you all that I know about farming.

Younger brother: Wait, brother. I know about farming, too. I've spent lots of time feeding pigs, remember? I have some good ideas for how to change things.

Older brother: What? You want me to take you back as a brother and now you want me to change what I do? Don't you know that's a little too much to take?

Younger brother: My brother, take me or not. It's up to you. But I am not coming back the same brother who left. I am very different than you. So, I guess we can't be brothers. You are just a good person. I forgive you.

Older brother: Wait a minute. When did it become bad to be a good person? Do I need forgiveness? Oh God! What is going on here? I'm not trying to be a good person. I'm trying to be your person. Yes, let my younger brother return, but to bread and water, not fatted calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a new ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling humbly in repentance, not dancing. Weren't his disgusting, embarrassing actions away from home bad enough? Does forgiveness mean he gets to change me by what he's been through?

Younger brother: My brother, I learned other things while I was feeding pigs. I learned that God loves everyone. In God's Kingdom, everyone is forgiven because of Jesus. In God's Kingdom, when one person repents, everyone celebrates, and everything changes. Good becomes bad. You are the good older son who stayed home and made a living for our family. But if your goodness turns you into a rigid, angry person, then that is bad. And you need to be forgiven. Let me tell you about forgiveness. Believe me, I know all about it. I was bad for so long, I couldn't forgive myself. I didn't deserve to be forgiven. I knew that. But when life just got so tough I couldn't take it, I figured what did I have to lose? I knew I didn't deserve to be forgiven, but I had nowhere else to go. And I asked our Father for forgiveness, and I was forgiven. The only difference between you and me is, I knew I was bad. You think you are good. But good turns into bad when you think that way. Because forgiveness isn't about being good or bad. It is about doing things God's way.

Older brother: My brother, I have forgiven you for being bad. Please forgive me for being good. And now, let us forgive God's way. Time, for me, stopped when you left home. My life was put on hold. I missed you. I worried that you were getting into trouble. Now that we are together again, let us start going from where time stopped. Let's catch up and listen to each other's stories. And let us take each other's experiences into consideration. You may be surprised. I don't do things the way you remember, either. Let's let our lives rock this world so that our farming becomes a worthwhile and valid ministry to all the people around. My brother, I'm no longer a good person. Neither are you any longer a bad one. Now we are God's people living together in forgiveness. And by the way, I am so glad you are home.

Let us pause for a time of Quiet Reflection

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us join in singing our Hymn of Response #444 in Glory to God. Forgive Our Sins as we Forgive – sung to the tune of Amazing Grace.