

IN CHRIST A NEW CREATION

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT MARCH 14, 2010 JOSHUA 5:9-12

PSALM 32 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21 LUKE 15:1-32

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.

YOU HAVE HEARD MORE THAN ONCE THAT A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS AND I WOULD INVITE YOU TO CONSIDER THIS REMBRANDT PICTURE THIS MORNING AS THE GOSPEL IN ONE PICTURE. FIRST, LOOK AT HOW THE SPOTLIGHT IS ON THE FATHER AND HIS SON. BEFORE THIS MOMENT THE SON WHO WAS THE YOUNGER OF THE TWO SONS HAD TOLD HIS FATHER THAT HE COULDN'T WAIT FOR HIM TO DIE UNTIL HE GOT HIS SHARE OF THE INHERITANCE. "YOU ARE BETTER OFF TO ME DEAD THAN ALIVE DAD." AND OF ALL THINGS THE FATHER GIVES IT TO HIM. HE GOES OFF AND BLOWS IT AND THEN COMES TO HIS SENSES AND COMES HOME TO THE FATHER. AND THE FATHER HAS BEEN WAITING, HE SEES HIS SON COMING, HE LIFTS HIS ROBE, BARES HIS BOTTOM AND RUNS TO MEET THIS SON, AND EMBRACED HIM – WELCOMED HIM HOME. AMAZING GRACE. CAN IT REALLY BE SO? WITH ALL YOU HAVE BEEN THROUGH IN YOUR LIFE, ALL YOUR WANDERING ALL YOUR THINKING – GOD, I REALLY DON'T WANT YOU IN MY LIFE BUT

ONLY WHAT YOU CAN GIVE ME. WHEN YOU COME TO YOUR SENSES, DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE A SPOT THERE BETWEEN THE ARMS OF A WAITING FATHER, WHERE YOU CAN BURY YOUR HEAD IN HIS CHEST.

THOSE OF YOU WHO ARE ON MY EMAIL LIST KNOW THAT FOR THE LAST 7 YEARS ON AN ALMOST WEEKLY BASIS, I SEND YOU THE SCRIPTURES FOR THE COMING SUNDAY AND I INVITE YOU TO WORK THOSE SCRIPTURES, AND TOLD YOU THAT AS YOU DO, THEY WILL DO THEIR GRACIOUS WORK ON YOU.

HERE'S A STORY TO PROVE THE POINT. IT WAS THE WINTER OF 1970, AND I WAS A FIRST YEAR STUDENT IN THIS BIBLE SCHOOL IN SEATTLE. IT WAS THE END OF THE QUARTER AND I HAD A TEST ON THE BOOK OF PHILLIPIANS THE NEXT DAY. DOORS TO THE DORM WERE LOCKED AT 10 PM AND LIGHTS HAD TO BE OUT BY 11 PM. I WAS SWEATING THAT TEST AND WAS NO WAY READY. BRAD – A SECOND YEAR STUDENT ALSO HAD SOME HOMEWORK THAT WAS UNDONE AND DUE THE NEXT DAY. HE CAME TO MY ROOM WHICH WAS ON THE FIRST FLOOR AND SUGGESTED THAT WE SNEAK OUT THE DORM WINDOW AND DRIVE TO DOWNTOWN SEATTLE AND SEE IF WE COULD FIND AN ALL NIGHT RESTAURANT WHERE WE COULD DRINK A LOT OF COFFEE AND STUDY. WE FOUND ONE TOWARDS DOWNTOWN, JUST OFF OF AURORA AVENUE, AND SAT IN A QUIET CORNER WHICH JUST HAPPENED TO BE THE LAST BOOTH ON THE WAY TO THE RESTROOM. WE GOT COMFORTABLE, ORDERED OUR COFFEE AND SPREAD OUR STUFF OUT ACROSS THE TABLE.

WE WERE THERE FOR A WHILE WHEN A MAN FROM ACROSS THE ROOM AT AN ADJOINING BAR CAME WALKING BY ON THE WAY TO THE RESTROOM. THE FIRST TIME HE JUST WALKED BY. ON HIS WAY BACK WE MADE EYE CONTACT AND HE LOOKED AT WHAT WAS ON THE TABLE AS HE WALKED BY. MUST HAVE BEEN AN HOUR LATER HERE HE COMES AGAIN ON A RESTROOM TRIP – LOOKING AT WHAT WAS SPREAD OUT ON TABLE THAT WE WERE WORKING WITH BOTH COMING AND GOING. HE MUST HAVE WALKED BY OUR TABLE A COUPLE MORE TIMES, GETTING MORE CURIOUS WITH EACH TRIP WHEN HE FINALLY STOPPED ONE TIME AND ASKED ME WHAT I WAS DOING. “STUDYING FOR A TEST ON THE BOOK OF PHILLIPIANS.” I SAID. “WHAT’S PHILLIPIANS?” HE SNORTED BACK. “IT’S A BOOK IN THE BIBLE.” I RESPONDED WITH. HE SAID SOMETHING DISRECTFUL THAT I DON’T WANT TO REPEAT HERE THIS MORNING AND THEN WENT BACK TO THE BAR. IT WASN’T TOO LONG BEFORE HERE HE CAME AGAIN ON HIS WAY TO THE RESTROOM. ON HIS WAY BACK, HE CHALLENGED ME WITH WHY I WOULD WANT TO BE STUDYING THE BIBLE. I TOLD HIM SOME OF MY OWN STORY OF HOW FAITH IN JESUS HAD COME ALIVE FOR ME. AND WALKED AWAY, WITH A SARCASTIC REMARK. IT HAD TO HAVE BEEN ABOUT 2 OR 3 IN THE MORNING WHEN HE CAME BY AGAIN ONLY THIS TIME HE PULLED UP A CHAIR AND TOLD ME (BRAD WAS JUST SITTING THERE.) THAT HE DIDN’T BELIEVE IN GOD. HE HAD BEEN TO VIET NAM AND COULDN’T BELIEVE A GOD WOULD ALLOW WHAT HE HAD SEEN OVER THERE. I WAS GETTING KIND OF SCARED BECAUSE HE WAS

RAISING HIS VOICE AND BECOMING CONFRONTIVE. AS A NINETEEN YEAR OLD KID SITTING ACROSS FROM THIS HARDENED VIET NAM VET, I TOLD HIM THAT GOD LOVED HIM. "NO WAY." HE RESPONDED. I HAVE SHOT INNOCENT CHILDREN AND WOMEN AND MEN, AND IT WOULDN'T BOTHER ME A BIT IF I JUST TOOK A PISTOL, POINTED IT TO YOUR FOREHEAD AND PULLED THE TRIGGER. IT WAS GETTING PRETTY TENSE WHEN I THINK I SAID SOMETHING LIKE "GOD LOVES YOU, YOU KNOW, NO MATTER WHAT YOU HAVE DONE. HE REALLY DOES." WE HAD A LITTLE STARE OFF AND THEN HE GOT UP AND WALKED AWAY. I ASKED BRAD WHY HE WASN'T HELPING ME AND HE SAID I WAS DOING JUST FINE. SOON HE CAME BACK AND I SAW TEARS COME INTO THE CORNER OF HIS EYES AND HE STARTED CRYING. HIS NAME WAS DON. I SPENT THE REST OF THE NIGHT VISITING WITH DON MOSTLY LISTENING TO HIS VIET NAM STORIES. THEN FINALLY OPENING UP MY NEW TESTAMENT, I STARTED SHOWING HIM SOME SCRIPTURES THAT SPOKE OF GOD'S LOVE AND FORGIVENESS FOR HIM. I WORKED THE WORD WITH HIM UNTIL ABOUT 6:30 IN THE MORNING AND ALL THE WHILE IT WAS STARTING TO GO TO WORK ON HIM. WE TOOK HIM BACK TO THE SCHOOL WHERE HE GOT A SHOWER AND BREAKFAST AND THEN HE HAD TO GO. BUT BEFORE HE LEFT, HE LOOKED DOWN AT THE BIBLE IN MY HAND AND SAID HE DIDN'T HAVE A BIBLE. I LOOKED DOWN AT MY NEW TESTAMENT WHICH HAD ALL MY UNDERLINING AND NOTES IN THE MARGINS. AND I GAVE IT TO HIM AND HE WAS OFF. WE PLANNED TO MEET AT THAT SAME RESTAURANT IN A WEEK. AND SURE

ENOUGH, DON WAS THERE WAITING FOR ME WHEN I SHOWED UP. HE TOLD ME HE HAD READ MY NEW TESTAMENT TWICE THAT WEEK AND COULD HE KEEP IT. HE OPENED IT AND STARTED SHOWING ME SOME THINGS HE HAD READ, ESPECIALLY FROM THE GOSPEL OF JOHN. I COULDN'T SAY NO, SO I SAID, "SURE YOU CAN HAVE IT." "HEY DON, WANT TO GO TO A LUTHERAN CHURCH WITH ME THIS SUNDAY?" HE SAID, "NO, I RAN INTO THIS BIG BLACK GUY DURING THE WEEK AND HE TOOK ME TO HIS BAPTIST CHURCH. HE'S A NEAT GUY. HE USED TO BE THE SPARRING PARTNER OF MOHAMMED ALI. "OH, A BOXER HUH?" I CONCEDED. THAT DAY WE LOST ANOTHER ONE TO THE BAPTISTS.

CAN YOU SEE DON IN THIS PICTURE? WE WORKED THE WORD AND THEN THAT WORD WENT TO WORK ON HIM AND HE FOUND A HOME, A SAFE PLACE, IN THE WAITING ARMS OF HIS HEAVENLY FATHER. AMAZING GRACE. CAN YOU IMAGINE HAVING YOUR OWN PLACE THERE?

TURN THE PICTURE OVER. CAN YOU FIND YOURSELF THERE? THERE IS A MAN WITH A STICK. HE IS THE OLDER BROTHER WHO THINKS ALL OF THIS IS SO UNFAIR. HE ISN'T SOLD ON THE IDEA OF AMAZING GRACE. HE WOULD LIKE TO BEAT HIS YOUNGER BROTHER TO DEATH AND THEN BEAT HIS FATHER WHO HAS EMBARRASSED HIMSELF AND THE WHOLE FAMILY WITH HIS RUNNING TO EMBRACE THIS WAYWARD SON.. THERE IS ANOTHER MAN SITTING THERE. DO YOU SUPPOSE HE IS WONDERING IF THERE COULD POSSIBLY BE AMAZING GRACE FOR HIM. AND A WOMAN IN THE BACKGROUND, MAYBE WONDERING IF A WOMAN

WOULD BE WELCOME ALSO. THE WORD TELLS US ALL ARE WELCOME.
COME WITH YOUR BROKENNESS. YOUR SHAME. YOUR EMBARRASMENTS.
YOUR DISAPPOINTMENTS. YOUR FAILURES. IS EVERYONE REALLY
WELCOME TO COME INTO THE WAITING ARMS OF HIS HEAVENLY FATHER?

ONE DAY BACK IN POST FALLS IN THE 90'S I SAW ON THE FRONT
PAGE THAT ONE OF MY PARISHONERS HAD BEEN ARRESTED FOR
MOLESTING FOUR YOUNG GIRLS. HE DECLARED HE WAS INNOCENT BUT
THE JURY FOUND HIM GUILTY. HE GOT OUT AFTER ONLY A COUPLE
YEARS IN PRISON AND HE CAME TO ME ONE DAY ASKING IF THERE WAS
ANY WAY ON EARTH HE COULD HAVE HOLY COMMUNION AGAIN. I
WANTED TO BE LIKE THE OLDER BROTHER AND BEAT HIM WITH THAT
STICK BECAUSE TWO OF THOSE LITTLE GIRLS HAD BEEN FROM MY
CHURCH. WE TALKED FOR A BIT AND HE MADE HIS CONFESSION TO ME
THAT HE INDEED HAD MOLESTED THOSE LITTLE GIRLS AND HE WANTED
TO ASK ME IF I THOUGHT GOD COULD EVER FORGIVE HIM. I WANTED TO
SAY NO. I WANTED TO TELL HIM WHERE HE COULD GO. BUT I COULDN'T
KEEP THE SACRAMENT AWAY FROM A REPENTANT MAN. FROM A MAN
WHO HAD COME TO HIS SENSES. THAT'S WHAT THIS STORY IS ALL ABOUT.
THIS IS THE POWER OF THIS WORD WE HAVE COME TO KNOW. A
POWERFUL WORD THAT HAS TO BE MORE THAN JUST MAN'S WORD OF AN
ANCIENT STORY. DON BECAME A NEW CREATION. AND SO DID EARL.

ONE OF THE TRAGIDIES OF OUR DAY IS THAT WE LIVE IN A TIME
WHEN EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED AND SO NOTHING NEEDS TO BE

FORGIVEN. WORKING THE WORD WILL TELL US WE SHOULD KNOW
BETTER. AND THEN THAT GRACIOUS WORD GOES TO WORK ON US SO
THAT YOU CAN KNOW YOU ARE SO WELCOME AT THIS TABLE THIS
MORNING. TO COME AS THAT PRODIGAL SON OR DAUGHTER KNOWING
THAT THERE IS SAFETY, SALVATION AND A NEW CREATION WAITING FOR
YOU. IT IS AMAZING GRACE FOR SURE. TRULY AMAZING GRACE. AMEN.