**Returning to God**

**Luke 5:27-32**

**Jesus Calls Levi (Matthew) and Eats With Sinners**

**27After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, 28and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.**

**29Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.**

**John 4**

**7When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” 8(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)**

**9The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.[**[**a**](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%204&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26166a)**])**

**10Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”**

**28Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 29“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” 30They came out of the town and made their way toward him.**

**39Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” 40So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. 41And because of his words many more became believers.**

**Ephesians 4:32**

**Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**

Today we are going to talk about returning to God. I’m going to do this with using 5 R words. I could use even more but let’s stick to just five. You see, you and I and everyone in this room, by our actions, thoughts and words, separate ourselves from God. We become disconnected with ourselves and each other and the world in which we live, and since God is intimately connected with all of those things, we first and foremost become disconnected from God, which ultimately leads to a life filled with agony. Richard Rohr puts it this way, “We go through our lives, our years on this Earth, thinking of ourselves as separate. That sense of separateness basically causes every stupid, sinful, silly thing we ever do. The little, separate self takes offense when people don’t show us proper respect. The separate self lies, steals, and does unkind things to other people. When we’re separate, everything becomes about protecting and defending ourselves. It can consume our lives. “In fact, that is perhaps the best definition of sin, anything that separates us from God. And perhaps the best definition of Hell then is prolonged separation from God. Heaven is then the state of being united with God, union with God. And let me tell you, God wishes nothing more than to be united with us, to bask in love. In the words of Kallistos Ware, a Greek Orthodox archbishop, “God does not condemn us to Hell. God wishes all humans to be saved (reconnected to God in and through love). God will love us to all eternity, but there exists the possibility that we do not accept that love and do not respond to it. And the refusal to accept love, to respond to it, that precisely is the meaning of Hell. Hell is not a place where God puts us; it is a place where we put ourselves.” Jesus spends his entire ministry inviting people back into God’s unconditional love. All we need to do to reconnect with God is accept that love. It is both that easy and that hard. Stop running away from God’s love. Stop telling yourself that you don’t deserve it. Embrace it. Let it flow upon you and through you to others through acts of compassion, generosity, and forgiveness, and see how quickly you will reconnect with God.

The model for this that Jesus uses is the story of the prodigal son (aka lost son). You must remember the story of the younger son who demands his inheritance, even before his father has died, which is akin to wishing the father was dead. He goes off and blows the whole inheritance on loose living. We’ll let you use your imagination as to what that all entailed. When he returns to his father, what does the father do? Does he make the son sacrifice? Does he make the son pay a price to return? Does he establish a probationary period for the son to regain the father’s trust? Does he condemn him to eternal torment? No, those are all concepts created by theologians. Jesus tells us that the father welcomes him with open arms, rejoices, showers him with love, and immediately restores him into the family. All he needed to do was return and accept and participate in his father’s love. That is the exact model Jesus puts forth for how God openly and eagerly receives us, regardless of how we have behaved. Believe it.

**Restoration** – Our second “R” word is restoration. Restoration is your return to your former, original, unimpaired self. We are born in the image of God. Our true self, the person God intends us to be is loving, compassionate, generous, forgiving, and peaceful, but somewhere along the way we lose a part of who we were or who we were destined to be. Sometimes this is through very early childhood trauma. Sometimes trauma besieges us later in life. Perhaps you were abused, or neglected, or abandoned. Most of the time it is through our own poor decisions. Maybe it was the wonderful sensation of a drug, and now you’re addicted. Or perhaps the lure of easy money. Or maybe it was hooking up with that guy you thought was amazing, until he wasn’t. Whatever it was, the serpent asked you to take a bite of the apple, and you did, and it led to you losing your way. Jesus encountered many just like you. People who lost their way.

 Let’s look at two such people, Matthew and Zaccheus, the tax collectors. Do you think that Matthew and Zaccheus were always thieving tax collectors, and keep in mind that is exactly how they were seen and why they were despised. As long as they collected for Ceasar, they could also collect for themselves. Picture it this way. You have to stop at the tax collector’s booth. You show the tax collector your ten dollars. He says, “OK, here is five for Ceasar, one for Herod, and one for me.” You are now left with only three of your hard-earned dollars. I think it was something like that, and yes, you would also despise the tax collector. But I can’t believe they were always that way. I surmise that they were probably respectable citizens before the lure of easy money tempted them.. Unfortunately, they succumbed to greed and now they are in a predicament. They are miserable with the decision they made but feel they have no other choice, kind of like you made your bed, now you must lie in it. What Jesus gives them is the opportunity for restoration and a path toward restoring them to the person they were meant to be. The Pharisees are shocked but Jesus knows that only nonjudgmental love can restore these men. And his love can also restore you. Who is up for a little restoration? I know I am. Jesus lays out the path to return to your true self, the person you were intended to be. Are you ready to follow it?

**Recover** – Our next word is recover. We need to recover the ancient wisdom and practices that we lost or undervalued such as communal worship, meditation and other contemplative practices, reflection on the scripture, and serving others in the communities in which we live and beyond.

Many people think that they can feed their spirit alone. Samuel Shoemaker, author of How to become a Christian tells the following story about a man sitting in front of a fire talking to his minister:

He said to him, “Parson, I don’t think I’ll come to church anymore. Religion is a very personal thing. I think I’ll just try to work it out myself.” The parson said nothing but picked up a pair of tongs and lifted a coal from the fire and placed it on the hearth. They both watched it slowly go out. Then the man said, “I see what you mean. I’ll be back next Sunday.”

In other words, worship and Christian fellowship provide a spiritual connection to God that isn’t seen when we are in isolation. By being here, you lift those around you, and they do the same for you. The spiritual presence of God seems to be exponentially increased.

And what about contemplative prayer and meditation? What about reflecting on scripture? When you leave this chapel tonight, do those activities disappear or are they a part of your Monday through Saturday life. What about when you leave this place and you are enveloped in a new life, or even return to your old life? Will these still be a part of who you are? To stay connected to God, we must be intentional about maintaining these spiritual endeavors.

This was an essential part of Jesus’ life. As busy as he was, he always took time for prayer and meditation.

Serving in your community is also a critical element to connecting with God. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if you feel distant from God, you probably aren’t doing enough to serve people in need within and beyond your community.

**Repair** – Now we move on to repair. We need to repair the deep breaches in our interpersonal and communal relationships that cause harm and destruction. We have broken relationships with people in this room, with family members, with friends, with coworkers, and do I dare say during this election season, with members of the opposite political party. To reconnect with God, we must tap into God’s spirit within us to reach out and repair broken relationships with grace, love and forgiveness, regardless of what caused the relationships to disintegrate and collapse.

When we forgive, we choose the goodness of others over their faults, we experience God’s goodness flowing through ourselves, and we also experience our own goodness in a way that surprises us.

Public theologian Jennifer Bailey puts it this way, “Without radical and rule-breaking forgiveness—received and given—there will be no reconstruction of anything. Without forgiveness, there will be no future. We have hurt one another in too many historically documented and remembered ways. The only way out of the present justified hatreds of the world is grace. An eagerness and readiness to love is the ultimate freedom and future. When we’ve been included in the spaciousness of divine love, there is just no room for human punishment, vengeance, rash judgment, or calls for retribution.”

Forgiveness is such a foundational part of Jesus’ message that we see him speak about it over and over. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother who sins against him, and Jesus replies, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times". This number is symbolic, representing the never-ending way that people should forgive. Jesus said this because people should treat others the same way God has treated them. It is perhaps the fastest way to reconnect with God.

**Reimagine** – Finally, let’s try to reimagine, our last “R”word. We need to reimagine what is possible for ourselves by stretching ourselves to see beyond the realities of our current circumstances and daring to dream something different into existence.  Your future is not limited by these walls. Every single day God gives you the opportunity to reinvent yourself, to reboot, to become the true self God intended you to be. You are born with an unquenchable divine fire withing in you. You can tap into that strength. The only thing that can limit your future is a lack of imagination.

Let’s look at the Samaritan woman at the well. Do you think in her younger years she dreamt of growing up having 5 husbands and then living with a man who wasn’t her husband. I doubt it. My wife has only had one husband and that’s been hard enough. We don’t know exactly what her circumstances were. Perhaps her husbands kept dying, in which case she had extremely bad luck and misery, or the makings of a movie about a female serial killer (lol, we won’t go there). Or perhaps her previous husbands divorced her. In that day it didn’t take much to divorce your wife. Regardless, I would surmise she had a tough time of things and probably couldn’t imagine her life improving but Jesus offers her the opportunity to reimagine who she could be, and she becomes one of his apostles, perhaps the first.

Who do want to be? What type of person? Where is your passion? What are your talents. If Jesus could take poor, probably illiterate, fishermen and turn them into “fishers of men”, disciples first and then apostles later, bringing the ways of Jesus to the world in which they lived, then what prevents you from such a transformation. If God could use Paul to do amazing things while he was in prison, then God can also use you to do amazing things while you are here. Only a lack of imagination stops you. Remember the spirit of God is upon you and within you. All you need to do is tap into it with some imagination. Are you ready for that transformation? I hope so. Amen.

The last three “R” words come from *Public theologian Jennifer Bailey*