

Let me tell you about this God I believe in. This God that runs out into the streets to welcome me home, even though I hurt him deeply. This story, is, to me, the core of Christian hope and faith. The boy did a terribly mean thing to his father. He, in effect, said that he wished his father would die so that he could live the way he wanted to. “Look, old man. You’re not dying fast enough for my tastes. So, let’s pretend you did. Give me the portion of your estate I’d have coming to me and I’ll be out of your miserable life for ever.”

The miracle of this story is that the father didn’t beat the son to death.

But look at how the father reacted. He graciously handed the money over to the boy. I can imagine he had tears in his eyes, not out of anger or even because he was having to liquidate his estate. No, the tears in the father’s eyes were tears of sadness because the boy was turning his back to him.

Then, after a while, the boy returns, pleading for mercy. Full of repentance. As he tops a little hill, he sees a figure standing by the gate to his home. It’s his father. The boy slows his pace down, not sure how to face this man he hurt so deeply.

But wait. The man is running as fast as his tired, old legs could carry him. His arms are wide open. When father and son collide, tears again roll down the father’s cheeks, but these are tears of joy and relief.

That’s my God. No matter how far I’ve wandered, when I turn back to him, he is there, running out to meet me. Holding me in a tight, loving embrace. Mixing my tears of shame with his of joy. I am home and I am loved.

That’s the God I believe in.

I wish our lectionary had chosen Romans 8:38 and 39 instead of the reading from 2 Corinthians. It is my favorite Pauline scripture. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”

Nothing. Nothing. There is absolutely nothing that can separate us from the love of God. I can tell god I wish he were dead and God will still love me. I can waste all of my money and potential and God will love me. Oh, he may be disappointed and even angry, but he will always love me.

That’s the God I believe in.

That’s not the only God out there. I know people who believe in an entirely different god. A god more like our wayward boy’s brother. Vengeful, mean spirited, unforgiving. This is the god of those condemn and judge. That’s the god of those who would exclude people from church and heaven because of perceived sinfulness.

I don’t believe in that god.

I know people who believe in a god that strikes people dead because of the sins of the world. A god that used religious fanatics to kill innocent men, women and children. A god that is said to cause diseases like HIV/AIDS to punish gays, whores and drug addicts. An executioner god.

I don’t believe in that god either.

Sure, God wants us to live in accordance with his will and his commandments. And, there are consequences for our actions. But our God will always be there with us and for us.

Some would say that I worship a wimpy god. A god that is all about feeling good and self esteem. Some would say that my god doesn't require repentance. I don't know how to answer that except to say that God is more interested in our relationship than with punishment.

I've heard something recently in 2 very different settings. One was a quote of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the other was attributed to John Newton, the author of the song which the movie Amazing Grace is titled. They said that there are two things to remember. We are great sinners and Jesus is a great Savior.

That's the God I believe in.

We are in Lent, a time for introspection and repentance. It is a time to look around us, like the wayward son and recognize the pig slop we're living in. It's a time to recognize that we have lowered ourselves to the level of animals by our sin, self-centeredness, hatred and apathy. It is a time to "come to our selves" as the boy did. Come to ourselves. To return to who we really are. A child of God loved beyond measure.

Lent will do nothing for us if we simply wallow in our depravity. This parable would have been completely different if Jesus had not made the boy turn away from his depravity and search for his father's love. That same John Newton wrote in his great hymn, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

Yes, I am a great sinner and Jesus is a great Savior. We know our weakness. Our frailty. Our sin. We are sinners all. We are redeemed all.

Look around. See and smell the muck and mire in which we live. See the people we have hurt by word or action, or even by inaction. Look around and see how far humanity has sunk in its quest for more and more. It doesn't matter what, just as long as we have more.

There is not a person here that can look in a mirror and say I do not sin. But there is no one here that can look in that same mirror and not say, Jesus died so that I would live in heaven for ever.

No one. John wrote, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

It took the boy a long time to figure that out. But he did and his dad ran out to greet him.

That's the God I believe in.

You, each and every one of you is a child of God and God loves you enough to die for you. There is nothing that you or I could do that would change that. Nothing. Neither death, nor life, hardness of heart, war, disease, famine or flood will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When the pig slop gets to be too much. When even empty husks look good. When the sky is its darkness. When fear, despair, grief and sorrow pull you into the pits of hell, remember this.

While still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. For he once was lost, but now he is found.

That's the God I believe in.