

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Redemption is a common and powerful theme in literature, movies and television. It makes for a good storyline—there’s usually a fall from grace, and then the striving to redeem oneself. I don’t know if you’ve seen any in the Jason Bourne movie series. Those are redemption stories. In case you haven’t, Jason Bourne was a trained killer for the CIA, but in the midst of one operation has pangs of conscience, aborts the mission, and is shot, losing his memory. He spends the rest of the movie trying to recover that memory while avoiding being killed himself. And succeeding at surviving, at the end of the first movie, he finds the daughter of a couple that he had killed and confesses to her — he did it. “I’m sorry,” he mutters.

Redemption ... it's a powerful theme. André got Marge and me watching “Once Upon a Time.” It’s a TV program with fairy tale characters brought into modern times. It’s quite interesting, and it’s filled with redemption stories. Watching one of last season’s episodes the other day, though, I noted the dialog of two of the characters: Snow White and Prince Charming. These heroes on the show had been shown to have made some bad choices, including lying to their daughter. Distraught, Snow White asked, “*But do you really think that redemption is possible?*” To which, Prince Charming replied, “*Yes. I have to believe we can earn forgiveness. A chance at grace. But to get there, we have to be the best people we can—work, spread hope and faith every day. Because otherwise, what we did will stain us forever.*”

Our Gospel lesson is a story of redemption, too. Tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus. “*Do you really think that redemption is possible*” for them? That’s the question set before us today. The Pharisees didn’t think so, and grumbled, “*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*” Jesus, on the other hand, did. Yes, He welcomed sinners and ate with them, not hard-hearted sinners who were unwilling to change, but sinners who repented and desired redemption.

Yes, Jesus thought that redemption was possible even for notorious sinners, and to instruct the Pharisees thus, He told the parable we have before us today: the Parable of the Prodigal Son, as it is called. But even before that, He told two others: the Parable of the Lost Sheep and of the Lost Coin. And at the end of these two parables, Jesus gives us the conclusion that we should be looking for also in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: God’s great joy “*over one sinner who repents.*”

The parable is a redemption story, for we certainly have a fall from grace. The younger son utterly disrespected his father, asking him for the inheritance. “*I don’t appreciate the hospitality of your house,*” he was saying to his father. “*I wish you were dead,*” for we all know that’s when inheritances are distributed. As Scripture

itself reminds us, “*For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.*” Not only that, but the father complies: hurt, sad, angry as he must have been, the father distributed the inheritance as requested.

Of course, the younger son was not done falling. He went away to a distant country, and enticed by the lusts of the flesh, having too much money and too little responsibility, he wasted all of his inheritance on prodigal living (that’s where the name of this parable comes from). He ended up penniless and hungry and alone. He wasn’t done falling. He found a job—taking care of pigs—unpleasant, unclean, rock bottom (even the pods the pigs ate looked appetizing to him); still he was not irredeemable. Yes, “*redemption was possible.*”

He was brought to repentance. “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*” Exactly right, although it seems as if he may have thought, like Prince Charming, “*Perhaps, I can have a chance at grace,*” “*I have to believe we can **earn** forgiveness.*” But that kind of grace is no grace at all. Grace is undeserved kindness, specifically God’s kindness toward us. As St. Paul reminds us, “*if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*” Again, St. Paul says, “*by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works....*”

The younger son thought he could work his way back into his father’s good graces: “*Treat me as one of your hired servants.*” But he was wrong, and would soon be surprised, overwhelmed by the true grace of his father, for when the father saw his son in the distance, the father humbled himself to run out to meet his son, to welcome him and restore him.

The son tried to speak his plan: “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son,*” but the father cut him off. He was having none of it. This was no servant! This was his son, redeemed by the father’s kiss of grace, forgiveness bestowed not earned, at peace with the father, anger turned away, restored by the father’s own compassion. The father covered the son with his own royal robe. He put on his finger a ring, and on his feet sandals. Oh the love of this father—this was a son! “*Prepare the fatted calf,*” he ordered—it’s time for a celebration. “*He who was dead is alive; he who was lost, is found.*”

Is redemption possible for manifest sinners—like the tax collectors and the sinners that Jesus welcomed? For sinners like you and me, who know our own transgressions, whose sin is ever before us, who are sinful from our mother’s wombs, whose sin against our neighbor is really sinning against God Himself? Redemption for us?

Yes, for ours is the greatest redemption story. The Lord does have mercy upon us and blots out our transgressions—in Christ Jesus. God the Son humbled Himself into our sinful flesh—not that He knew sin Himself, but He became sin for us, and He humbled Himself all the way to a death on the cross—His blood the redemption price for our sins. And this so that He Himself might reconcile the world to Himself, not counting our trespasses against us.

This is His grace toward us sinners—His desire to seek and to save the lost—His joy over the sinner who repents and desires forgiveness. This is the Lord’s great love toward sinners, His welcoming embrace, His kiss of peace.

But lest we forget, there is another son in the parable, the elder son, who also, you might note, received his inheritance before his time, yet considered himself righteous, who was angry and indignant at the father for his grace to his brother. He refused to rejoice at his brother’s return. He grumbled at his father. He needed redemption, too, and it was possible for him. The father came out to meet him, just as with the younger son. The father was gracious to him. *“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It’s fitting to celebrate and be glad.”* *“Come,”* his father pleaded. But he refused, as did the grumbling Pharisees complaining about Jesus’ compassion toward sinners. Redemption was possible for them, too, but not according to their works. St. Paul records, *“Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. . . . Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone.”*

Is redemption possible? Yes, is Jesus’ answer, for the most brazen of sinners, and for sinners deceived by their own self-righteousness. Yes, by the grace of God in Christ Jesus; yes, by His redeeming work; yes, by the reconciliation that He effected; yes, by the forgiveness He bestows — not by our own works lest anyone should boast.

Yes, redemptions stories are powerful and compelling stories, and our redemption story is the greatest one ever told with eternal consequences. Therefore, rejoice for your place in this story. Rejoice that God has granted you the repentance that makes the angels in heaven sing. Rejoice that God has taken you who were dead, and made you alive in Christ Jesus; you who were lost have found your salvation in Him. Rejoice! *“Let us eat and celebrate.”* His table has been prepared for you today.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.