

Redemption Stories

Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This morning, I want to talk about two of my favourite things. Redemption stories and the grace of God.

I have always loved the stories of the lost being found, about wanderers coming home, about the imprisoned being unshackled, about the ways in which the grace of God mercifully reroutes human lives that have gone off course.

I suspect the same is true for many of you.

We've just heard the words of a man who has one of the most famous redemption stories in history, a man who interpreted his entire story through the lens of being lost and then found—grabbed hold of by the grace of God.

We're going to talk more about the Apostle Paul and his words to Timothy a bit later.

But I want to begin with two stories or conversations about redemption and the grace of God.

The first one took place at a downtown coffee shop a year or so ago. I was in the midst of an invigorating and wide-ranging conversation with an acquaintance.

It was one of those encounters where the person you're talking with is much smarter than you. This person had an armload of very impressive degrees and knew a lot more than I did about a great many things. I felt like I was scrambling to keep up for most of the conversation. It was good exercise for the brain.

Somehow, we got on the topic of redemption and my friend offered the following commentary:

I think that the Christian doctrine of redemption—this idea that we need to be “redeemed” from something—is just wrong. And it’s done all kinds of harm.

My initial reaction to the comment was one of mild surprise.

For me, the word “redemption” is inextricably up with all kinds of other beautiful and life-giving words like “forgiveness,” “hope,” and “salvation.”

I associate it with the possibility—indeed, the promise!—that how things *have been* does not need to be how they *will be*. It speaks to me of a God who extends mercy and offers second chances.

Redemption declares that no failure is final.

The word obviously has other connotations, as well. For my friend, the doctrine of redemption casts human beings as inherently deficient and sinful.

It represents a fundamentally destructive view of human nature that has been and continues to be a tool of colonial expressions of Christian mission.

It plants harmful ideas in young minds, including the notion that we need to be “saved” from something.

It turns us into groveling serfs at our master’s door, pleading for his favour, apologizing for our existence, rather than confidently stepping forth to become all that we want to be in the world.

For my friend, the central premise of redemption—that we need it—is what must be decisively rejected. We are fine how we are. It’s religious doctrines like the human need for redemption that keep us from freedom and flourishing.

We went back and forth on this for a while, but I don’t think I made much of a dent in my friend’s views.

For the second story, I want to rewind about four months and travel about three kilometers down the road to the Lethbridge Correctional Center.

As some of you know, I'm occasionally part of a support group that called "Steps to Freedom" there each spring. I am basically there to support the chaplain, to listen, to offer what I can to the spiritual growth of the inmates.

On this morning, there was a younger indigenous woman who was sitting quietly while the lesson was read. She had spiky jet-black hair streaked with blond, a few tattoos on her face, one that looked like a tear drop of blood.

I wouldn't have been surprised if she sat in stony silence throughout our time together. She didn't look like she had much to say.

Turns out, she did. Quite a lot, actually. And it wasn't what you'd expect. It wasn't what I expected, anyway.

She talked about how she had miraculously forgiven her parents after participating in what sounded like one of those wild charismatic Christian programs that use phrases like, "capture back what the enemy has stolen" and "kill every satanic embargo" and "be victorious in your dreams at all times" a lot.

She talked at length about demons and strongholds and spiritual warfare. She could recite bible verses better than many pastors I know. Probably Better than the one telling this story.

God had turned her life around!

It got better. Or worse, I suppose, depending on your perspective. She triumphantly declared that she had destroyed all of her sweet grass and cultural regalia (she used to be a ceremonial dancer). Ditto for her all materials related to astrology and horoscopes.

I half expected her to say that she had burned her secular rock and roll cassettes, as was the familiar ritual in the lives of so many evangelical teenagers when I was a kid (except she was probably too young to even know what a "cassette" was!).

Her story was about as inconvenient as you could hope to find in our post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission Canada and post-residential schools church.

A young indigenous woman walking *away* from her culture and toward a rather extreme form of the religion that has historically done so much to wound and oppress her people.

Didn't she realize that she had things exactly backward?!

I thought of what my progressive Christian, agnostic, or atheist friends would think if they were sitting around the circle this morning (including the person in my first story). I could almost hear them gasp with horror.

There were times when I found it difficult to listen to! Surely this was an example of a vulnerable young woman being taken advantage of by opportunistic and greedy religious snake oil salesmen.

Surely this was another tragic example of the oppressed grabbing on to the categories of their oppressors in the absence of better narratives.

And she was, not to put too fine a point on it, back in jail. So, you know, how well was this brand of Christianity actually working for her?

I noticed something else that morning, and most mornings I spend at the jail.

When I start talking about God and faith in my usual highly nuanced, careful, educated ways, the inmates usually smile politely, ask a few questions, offer a bit of qualified appreciation.

But when one of their fellow inmates starts talking about angels and demons and punching the wall to get Satan out of their room and screaming the name of Jesus to chase the bad dreams away and tearing down strongholds and deliverance and victory, then the heads start nodding a lot more enthusiastically.

They have little time for mushy, tolerant, understanding Jesus. They need Christ the victor who exorcises the demons and shatters the chains. They need the one who forgives and offers the hope of another chance.

I resonated with very little of this woman's experience and testimony that morning four months ago. I cringed throughout her (long) telling and could have picked it apart theologically in any number of ways.

And, again, for all her talk of radical new beginnings in Jesus she was still sitting in a circle of plastic chairs in the prison chapel on a Monday morning, so...

Well, so what? She claimed that Jesus had helped her to forgive her parents for abandoning her, that Jesus had set her free from addiction, and that Jesus had given her meaning and victory in her life.

And for all my theological erudition (real or imagined), I haven't walked a single step in her shoes. I have no idea what she has endured, no idea what she has left behind, no idea what she has already conquered or what roads she has yet to walk down.

I have no idea the ways in which Jesus has come to her with grace and truth or the ways in which she has found him powerfully faithful.

Your perspective on redemption depends a lot on the vantage point from which you consider it, doesn't it?

Some of you likely resonate more with my first conversation. You're suspicious of how the word "redemption" has been used in the church, you think it has led to teaching people that they are fundamentally flawed or damaged, that they need rescue.

You'd rather talk of human beings as divine image bearers than sinners in need of a Saviour.

And You have highly tuned radar for stories that sound too good to be true. Life is more complicated than the "I once was lost but now I'm found" stories that sell so well in pop culture. You're a realist, after all.

Others, perhaps, resonate more with the young woman in the jail. Maybe you've found yourself in some dark places in life and you've experienced the grace and mercy of God in powerful and personal ways. Maybe you've been set free from something.

In our second reading this morning, the Apostle Paul is writing to his young protégé Timothy. Later in the book, he will have all kinds of practical advice for Timothy about how to shepherd God's people, but he begins with his own story.

"It's incredible," Paul says. "I was judged faithful and appointed to the service of Christ, *even though* my story is pretty sketchy!"

I was a righteous and zealous persecutor of the church. I was a blasphemer—I spoke of God falsely, I was convinced that people of the Jesus Way were heretics to be eliminated.

I was a man of violence. I was there, cheering righteously on, at the stoning of Stephen!

I was, Paul says, the worst of sinners. And then Jesus knocked me down, struck me blind, and overwhelmed me with the grace and love that led me to see clearly.

Paul was an educated man who had all of his theological ducks in a row. He was trained in an elite rabbinical school. He knew his Torah. He was an expert in the ways of God. He lived a life of singular devotion to God and God's ways.

And yet he was totally lost.

But the Christian hope is that what is lost can be found. It is that God never stops pursuing his wayward children.

The Christian conviction is that God is patient and merciful, full of grace and truth.

This was Paul's experience. This was what Paul wanted young Timothy to know. Redemption stories are real—I know this because I, the very worst of sinners, an enemy of Christ's church have experienced it personally.

I know what it is to experience the overflowing grace and love and faithfulness of Christ Jesus.

This week, while I was thinking about this word "redemption," I took the entirely unoriginal step of looking it up in the dictionary.

Redemption:

- the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil
- the action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt
- the action of buying one's freedom: soldiers who were captured had to seek redemption

So, redemption can mean being saved from sin... or regaining possession of something... or clearing a debt... or freedom.

Or all of the above and more.

The truth is, I can fully understand the critique of redemption that my friend in the coffee shop made. The church has used the word “redemption,” at times, as a blunt instrument to beat people down with their sinfulness.

And I can fully understand the hunger for redemption stories represented by the woman I encountered in jail—the powerful hope that when we have made a mess of our lives, there is yet hope in Christ.

I feel both, to varying degrees at various times. But I always end up resonating more with the woman in the jail than my educated friend at the coffee shop.

I don’t do this as a result of carefully and rationally weighing the arguments and logical merits of each “position.”

I do this because I have kept company with Jesus and his gospel for three and a half decades or so (however poorly at times), and because I know that Jesus is more at home with the down and out than with the super-educated smarty-pants types (including me!).

I know that Jesus lifts up those at the end of their ropes who can only say, “Have mercy on me, a sinner!” and that he has stern words for those who say, “Thank God I am upright and schooled in the ways of religion rather than that miserable tax collector!”

I also end up resonating more with the woman in jail than my friend in the coffee shop because I occasionally have the courage to inspect my own soul.

I am a sinner in need of salvation. I make errors that need correction. I am a debtor who can’t make the balance sheet work. I am enslaved and thirst for freedom.

I need to be redeemed, in the broadest sense of the word.

And so do you. It may be an unpopular thing to say, but I am convinced that it remains true.

This is a saying that is true, Paul says and worthy of full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15).” Which is all of us.

To be human is to fall short of the mark. We may not all lose our way as sensationally as Paul did, but each one of us loses our way at times. We explored this in our summer series on the seven deadly sins.

But we are not groveling serfs at our master’s door; we are dearly loved children, created for good works, to bear God’s image to the world.

We are not miserable wretches who must be punished, but God’s cherished possession who are showered with grace, mercy, and patience, in the hopes that we will turn to him.

What Paul tells Timothy, what Jesus tells grumbling scribes and Pharisees who can’t understand why Jesus is hanging out with the riffraff rather than upstanding religious people like them, is that what is lost can be found.

No story, no human life is beyond rescue. No one has wandered too far to come home.

And saving sinners is what brings God great joy!

This is the grace and mercy of God that Paul would spend the rest of his days proclaiming.

This is the God that Jesus not only taught about in his parables but embodied in his life and in his saving death, resurrection, and ascension.

This is the God we worship all these many years later.

And this is why we, with Paul, can only end with words of praise.

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever (1 Tim 1:17).

Amen.

