

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:

the old has passed away and everything has become new.”

That’s how Saul must have felt after that great lightning flash engulfed him,

and he faced Jesus Christ. Saul had been persecuting, murdering

Christians with great fervor, and he discovered that day

that he had really been torturing Jesus himself.

Saul’s old perspective was turned upside down,

and everything then became new, which is reflected in his second letter

to the Corinthians that we heard from in the epistle reading.

That’s how the prodigal son must have felt when he returned home

and found himself, not working as a hired hand,

but in the embrace of his father who was blanketing him with love.

After wasting his inheritance and hitting rock bottom,

this son learned that the love of his father had nothing at all

to do with his own worthiness or merit.

Though he had not known it, the prodigal son had never not

been held within the loving embrace of his daddy.

Everything became new for him that day, and he, a new creation.

This is a wonderful story of God's kingdom; of God's extravagant love.

I want to share another wonderful story with you. — Regina's story:

Regina was trapped on the streets of Nashville for years.

Her childhood and adolescence were filled with abuse,

drugs, and prostitution. Finding no way out, she,

like so many others in similar circumstances,

took to the streets and fell victim to that same vicious downward spiral

marked by turning tricks to pay for drugs to dim the pain.

A miserable life of continued abuse;

the only constant in her life.

Regina had made a pact with her few friends — partners on the streets,

that if one of them found a way out of that miserable life,

she would let the others know.

That was the tiny ray of hope that they shared.

Finding herself in prison once again, Regina recalls,

"I was so far down I could not get up. I prayed, 'God help me!

Please give me one more chance to be a mother.'

I could see no way out;
even the thought of making parole scared me to death;
I would soon then be back on the streets in that deadly cycle —
the only life I knew.”

Ministering to abused women in the streets
and under the bridges of downtown Nashville,
Becca Stevens and her team eventually found Regina’s friends
and invited them to come to Magdalene House.
They then followed through on their commitment to Regina.
They located her and told her about Magdalene House.

“You’ve gotta come here!” her friends begged Regina.
“It’s a beautiful house and we can live here for two years for free!”
“How can that be?” Regina responded with great skepticism.
“We don’t know, but an Episcopal priest started it and it’s real.
Come see!”

Regina was doubtful about the whole thing;
and really apprehensive about the priest.

All she could imagine was that white collar constantly evoking her to bow down in reverence; being in the confessional for hours at a time acknowledging a lifetime of sin.

When she finally found the courage to come and see, Regina saw no pious looking cleric wearing a collar. Quite the opposite, Becca Stevens stood there in her Daisy Duke shorts and halter top, with a baby hanging on her hip.

“You a priest?!” Regina marveled, flabbergasted.

Magdalene House, in her eyes, looked like a mansion.

It was beautiful, with bedrooms that had real beds; a kitchen complete with dishes and silverware; lovely paintings and photographs on the walls.

For the first time in years Regina was reminded of what home could be like.

She remembered, “For years and years I had known only metal cots in a prison cell or abandoned homes where we would gather for the next hit. We called them abandominiums.

“I felt wholeness that day, almost 20 years ago,” Regina recalls, her whole presence aglow. “For almost 20 years this has been working. I learned how to trust myself. And if I’m looking down on my sister, it’s because I’m helping her up.”

Regina now serves as manager of the residents at Magdalene House, loving on them *and* helping hold them accountable; and she has become a loving mother to her own daughter.

Regina’s story is one of a multitude of similar stories that exemplify transformation and gratitude — because someone cared. And others, each in their unique way had been lost, came to see. Who didn’t buy into the common myth that some people are worthless and should be punished, disregarded, cast away or killed.

Did you notice how our gospel lesson began: “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Not so different from today, is it?

Mostly society would see women like Regina as worthless, immoral, a burden to society; or not see them at all.

If we really *hear* Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, we, like Magdalene House founder Becca Stevens, cannot respond in the conventional way.

We cannot react like the scribes and Pharisees, or like the prodigal's brother:

"They don't deserve this special treatment."

Did you notice that in the end, it was the brother who really lost out? He had not lead a bad life, but it had somehow stagnated, preventing the healing, reconciliation and celebration that his brother and father were able to enjoy.

In the Feasting on the Word Lectionary Commentary, Professor of Religion Daniel Deffenbaugh reminds us that, "grace lies at the heart of this parable – scandalous grace, grace that defies all earthly rules and conventions." In fact, the word "prodigal" means wastefully extravagant.

We could call this the parable of the prodigal father
because of his wastefully extravagant love and mercy;
which is really the point.

Deffenbaugh goes on to say that, “the economy of such love and grace
surprises, even offends, us in its extravagance.

While the ways of the world suggest that yes,
the son might be welcomed home, but reasonably so —
on a ration of bread and water in answer to his deplorable sin —
the economy of God is such that rejoicing for the return of a child
is simply not enough. Joy must be made all the more complete
with abundance: the best robe, the finest ring, the fatted calf...”

The home that feels like a mansion, delicious food,
time for real healing to occur —
all given in exchange for a wounded body and soul in search of wholeness.

The response of God to all of this
is abundant compassion, rejoicing, and grace.

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation:
the old has passed away and everything has become new.” Amen.

