

“Can People Change?” / Luke 15:11-32 / 15 September 2013

Can people change? I mean really, truly change? Can Bashar al-Assad have a real change of heart? Could his conscience waken him at 3am, trembling, in a cold sweat. In that early morning hour, do you think that even he might shed tears of remorse for the atrocities he's committed against the very people who looked to him for protection? Can people change? Do you think that Kim Jong-un might be walking around his palace in his silky robes one day, when it occurs to him, “Hey, you know, I've been entirely too paranoid. I think I'll stop testing nuclear bombs offshore. And as long as I'm rethinking stuff, maybe I'll fire my barber and get a better haircut, too.” Do people ever really change? And how about the anti-gay, funeral-picketing pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church? Do you think old Fred Phelps might be leafing through his Bible one day, and instead of turning to Leviticus, his gaze might land upon Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and he might decide, “You know, I'm done hating. My Lord commands me to love, and so by golly, I'm going to do it!” I mean, we've seen it happen in the movies. Even Darth Vader becomes a good guy in the end. But real change is hard. In fact, I have come to believe that in most cases, people will only change when the pain of remaining the same begins to outweigh the pain of changing. Some people call this “hitting rock bottom,” and it's what the Prodigal had to do.

Alfred Nobel, the Swede who created the Nobel Peace Prize, was first of all a chemist and the inventor of dynamite. The story is told that when his older brother died, Alfred purchased a newspaper just to read his brother's obituary. Strangely, the editors who wrote the obituary had made a mistake. They believed that it was actually Alfred, not his brother, who had died. And so, while he was still relatively young, Alfred got to read his own obituary many years before his death. Now, Alfred Nobel was a wealthy man for all his many inventions. He was a brilliant, accomplished scientist, fluent in four languages. Most people don't know it, but he invented plywood and a primitive sort of torpedo. But as Nobel read his own obituary, he became increasingly aware that he would be remembered for one thing and one thing only: weapons of mass destruction. His work with explosives had made it much easier to kill great numbers of people all at once. Nobel was heartbroken to consider his great contribution to history, and his investment in the future of the world, was bloodshed. And so, he decided to take his life a different direction altogether. He devoted his enormous wealth to the creation of a prestigious prize for people who promote peace on a global scale: the Nobel Peace Prize. Sometimes, life holds a mirror up to our face, and we don't like what we see. Sometimes we know, deep in our heart of hearts, that it's time to change. The question is, can we do it? Can people change?

That's the question that the older brother is asking himself at the end of Jesus' parable in the Book of Luke. C'mon, dad, you really think that worthless brother of mine has changed? The older brother, the one who never went astray, he stands outside the house listening to the timbrels and the flutes. Neighbors' horses are grazing in the yard; there's laughter and dancing inside, and dad comes teetering out to say, “Come, join in the party! Your brother's come home! He's safe and well! Do you know I haven't had a whole night's sleep since he left? Come celebrate!” Then dad goes dancing back into the house, a little bit unsteady on his feet—the older brother observes—but with a little skip in his step, a laurel flower in his hair, and carrying an empty wineglass.

You can see how it hurts. Here's the sunburned older brother with dirt under his fingernails from working in dad's fields. No one ever threw a party to celebrate all his hard work and reliability. At that unhappy moment, ironically, the older brother, the faithful one, is the outsider. And he has a choice to make. He can stand out here and tell himself the story he's been reciting for all these years: “That ne'er-do-well little brother goes off and wastes everything on prostitutes and hard drink! Their sentimental old fool of a father just keeps giving and giving, and I'm the one whose inheritance will be the less for it!” Yes, the elder brother has a choice. He can recite these same old stories of disappointment and sorrow. He can sing his song of bitterness, for he was truly wronged! Or...or he can embrace a new story of forgiveness and transformation. If the envious brother joins in the party, then he's agreeing to a whole new story. He's agreeing to put aside his old story of all the wrongs that

were done, and he's promising to start telling himself instead a hopeful new story of welcome for the one who went astray, then came home. If he steps into the party, he's signing on for a whole new set of relationships, a whole new approach to his father, to his brother, to his own life. Does he have room in his heart for that? Can he allow his brother to change? Can he himself change? Can people change, can you?

Forgiveness! Forgiveness is a kind of healing. And like all healing, it means telling yourself a better story than the one that keeps you broken. There comes a time when you find yourself standing outside the party, standing alone out in the cold with a decision to make: Will I go on nurturing within myself the stories that make me angry and scared, or am I going to find a better story to live by? Can I change, can you?

Sometimes the question is not, "Can people change," but "Will we let them?" My younger daughter, Greta, recently approached me while I was washing the dishes, and she was being very quiet, which was my first clue that something unusual was afoot. After lingering for just a while, acting all pensive and preoccupied, finally she said, "Daddy, I'm thinking about changing my name. I like the name Greta, but I want people to call me by my middle name, Noëlle." I was actually kind of happy to hear it, since I'm the one who chose the name Noëlle, and her mother chose the name Greta. But I said to her, "That's fine, sweetheart, but it might be kind of hard to get people to switch." She said she was going to try. The following day, she got off the school bus dragging her feet and dragging her backpack. She was clearly dispirited, and I said to her, "What's the matter? Did you have a bad day at school?" She said, "Yes. All my friends said that they'll call me Noëlle, but my teacher said that if I write Noëlle on my assignments, he'll mark them wrong." It's not usually our teachers who prevent us from changing; it's the people who love us, but who don't know how to be in relationship with us if we grow.

For a while, I watched the Showtime series *Shameless*, in which a band of kids raise each other, running wild in the streets of Chicago, while their drunken father and absentee mother are out trying to find happiness. In a few episodes, the father—who is played by William H. Macy—tries to clean up his act. He quits drinking, moves back home with the kids, and reads them bedtime stories. But when he does, everything falls apart. Nobody knows how to act. Their personalities and their whole family system are built around dad's drinking. They truly do long for him to be present with them and well, but a part of them just wants things to stay the way they are because they've learned how to cope. Sometimes we don't let the people we love change because their brokenness we know how to live with. But their healing! Their healing changes everything. Can people change? I believe that they can, but will we let them?

The older brother isn't ready to let his younger brother off the hook for the mess he's made. He probably has a kind of love for the Prodigal, but he's also angry, and he wants the kid to suffer just a little. Besides, if he signs on for this new story—this brand new paradigm of a repentant and transformed little brother—then he (the older brother) will have some changing to do, too. But his is not a unique problem. There comes a quiet moment in all our lives when we stand outside the party, standing alone in our bitterness and self-righteousness, listening to the music and the dancing, nursing our old wounds into fresh, new hurts. And at that moment, standing on the outside, we have a decision to make: Will we love the old truths that we've been telling ourselves for so long, will we continue to abide by all the same old stories that our tired hearts know verbatim? Or will we take the risks of telling ourselves a new story—a story of change and healing? Will we go in and join the party, in the foolhardy hope that maybe this time change can really happen—unafraid of the other changes that will come in its wake? I don't know about you, but I would rather take a chance on a new and better story. I'd rather take a chance on forgiveness and healing than to remain stuck in the angry old stories that always begin and end in the same destructive ways. Can people change?

Do you know your "Myers/Briggs personality type"? Long ago, the psychologist Carl Jung came up with some theories about human personalities. (Now, remember that it was Carl Jung who

said, “Show me a sane man, and I will cure him.”) Jung’s theories about personality were later developed into a nice system known as the “Myers/Briggs personality types.” According to this view, there are not two kinds of people in this world—as we’re forever being told—but there are actually sixteen kinds of people, and each of the sixteen types can be described in four letters. I’ve never much studied the Myers/Briggs categories, but I do remember that many years ago—when I was in college—I took a test to discover that I was an INTJ, like 3% of the population. INTJs are basically bookish people who get cranky if they don’t get enough time by themselves in the woods. Michelle recently came home from work talking about the Myers/Briggs types, and so I took the test again. And still—after more than twenty years—I remain the exact same kind of person that I was in college. When I consider all the things that have happened in the past twenty years, the sorrows, the losses, the unexpected gains, the education, the Africa years, the marriage and fatherhood; when I consider just how much my mind has changed about some pretty big issues; when I consider all the real emotional and spiritual healing that has occurred, in my life, the growth, the maturing I find it almost impossible to believe that my personality is still the same. And yet, it is. Yours probably is, too. Yes, people do change, but the essential ingredients of our characters remain pretty much intact. Time and experiences just help us to rearrange the placement of those same old components. This character trait gets moved down to the basement; that one gets put up in the front window. This other trait that used to be so prominent gets stuffed away in the attic. It’s still there, but we don’t revisit it much anymore. Life causes us to shift our focus from one part of ourselves to another. Healing occurs. It happens when we finally work up the courage to tell ourselves a better story.

Forgiveness is another form of healing, and the older brother needs it very badly. We all do, from time to time. Healing occurs in the dark, when no one is looking. Healing occurs over long years, only when the time is right. Healing takes time, but it can begin with a single intentional step. For the older brother, that step is toward the house, into the dining room, where the music is playing and the Prodigal is waiting to be welcomed and embraced. For the older brother, the long journey into healing begins with the risk of saying to himself, “Okay, I’m going to stop reminding myself that this guy has been a lout, and I’m going to start telling myself that he’s hit rock bottom, and now he’s trying to change.” That’s the new and better story that can transform relationships and open the future wide. It’s the same no matter what area of your life needs healing—whether you’re grieving a loss, recovering from addiction, or just dealing with a lot of hurt; there comes a time when you can decide to start dwelling on a better story.

The TV series, *Sons of Anarchy*, recently ended by panning over scenes of violence and grief, scenes of daily life, conjugal scenes, scenes that showed the real struggles of the characters—the sad mother of a school shooter, a heroine addict raging at a mirror, a man cheating on his wife—and over the silent cameo shots, Leonard Cohen crooned, “O, gather round the brokenness; bring it to me now, the fragrance of those promises you never dared to vow, the splinters that you carried, the cross you left behind: Come healing of the body, come healing of the mind. O let the heavens hear it, the penitential hymn: Come healing of the spirit, come healing of the limb.”

Where in your life do you need to find forgiveness? Where in your life do you need to find healing? They’re not short processes; they’re long, and they only happen when the time is right, but maybe that time is now. Besides, there’s always that first step, that initial determination to tell yourself a better story than the old one that’s been keeping you angry, or scared, or envious, or lonely. Transformation! People can change! The world itself can change. Isn’t this the deep desire of every human soul? Isn’t it the great longing of every prophet and every religion, at its core—that new possibilities might be born out of old disappointments, that our relationship, and our hearts, and our spirits might be made new and whole? The story of the Prodigal, you may have noticed, leaves us hanging. We never find out if the older brother joins in the party. Jesus leaves his parable intentionally incomplete, because each of us alone must determine what the ending to our incompleteness will be. Can people change? Can you? Amen.

