

## Lent 5 Year C

Last week I began by asking how many of you are the eldest in your family, how many of you are middle children and how many are the youngest. I did that in part because of the way psychologists have taught us that our first relationships in life impact how we relate to others for the rest of our life.

However, I also did that because I have noticed over the years that we bring the perspectives that were shaped in our family systems with us when we read the Bible, so that when we look at the story of the Prodigal Son, youngest children tend to identify with the Prodigal and thus love the story while oldest children tend to identify with the older brother and declare the father's behavior as unfair.

The underlying assumption in last week's sermon was that our past influences our present, so we would do well to have some awareness of that as we journey with God through life.

Fair enough. However, this week I intend to show you that, from a Christian perspective, some of what I said last week was pure BUNK, and that this week at least some of what I will declare to you will appear, at first glance, as if it is the exact opposite of what I said last week.

Today's message is this: The past doesn't matter one little bit. Don't believe me? Then explain 2 of our 3 readings for this morning.

First, from the prophet Isaiah: "Do not remember the former things or the things of old. I [the Lord] am about to do a new thing."

And from St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: "But this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

In the first passage the prophet is speaking to Israelites who had seen their capital, their Temple and their monarchy destroyed by the Babylonians. In the second passage Paul is defending his credibility as a Jewish teacher, but emphasizing that nothing in his past amounts to a hill of beans when compared to what he has received from Christ Jesus.

So which is it? Do our pasts matter or not? Well let me give you a very clear answer: Yes and No. For the “yes” part, allow me to take an illustration from childhood.

Do you remember when we were kids, and were playing some game on our street, let’s say kickball, and somebody kicked a real boomer over everybody’s head, and the kicker’s charging around the bases, but as they round third a car turns down the street, interrupting play, then what happens next? Somebody calls out “Do Over!” because the car interfered with the play.

We had lots of “Do Overs” in childhood, didn’t we? While playing Hide and Seek, the person who is “it” and the person who is hiding both reach base with a bang, bang play, “Do Over!”

When playing football, the ball is fumbled and the players pile up going for the ball, and when the pile clears, two players are clutching the ball, one from each team. “Do Over!”

Even when we grow up it continues. Every golfer knows that “taking a Mulligan” is just another way of calling a do over.

Our past matters because we can always learn from the past. But our past doesn’t matter because God says we can always call a Spiritual “Do over.”

Oh, now we call it repentance or being born again, but calling a Spiritual Do Over is really an acknowledgement that God has the power to change us and will use his transforming power whenever we reach the point of realization that we cannot go on without God’s help.

A person who calls a Spiritual Do Over understands that the choices we made 20 years ago don’t mean as much as the decision we make today.

Your weaknesses don’t matter to God. Your personality quirks don’t matter to God. Your birth order doesn’t matter God. The only thing that matters is that you love God, accept your need for his help every day, and commit to what St. Paul describes as “pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” In other words, keep your eyes on where you’re going.

Everything else is old news.

Have you ever wondered how the Prodigal Son and his older brother got along or didn't get along after the big party in last week's gospel lesson?

While understanding their roles in the family was helpful when everything was spinning out of control, in order for the two brothers to reconcile, they were going to have to let go of the past and start over.

And so the message for today is that Christ offers us a new beginning whenever we need one, whenever we realize that our own power is insufficient to the task, and that God's power is limitless and available whenever we call. AMEN