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Two Families – Both Invited to Change

By The Rev. Sam Sheridan

In my family, our most poignant family story is that my Grandma Mary lived believing she could not change. She also lived most of her life believing she was responsible for her own mother's death.

When my grandmother Mary was 16, she struck a bargain with her mother Ellen to both quit smoking together and hold each other accountable in their quitting. My grandmother Mary was first to give up on trying to quit. As soon as my great grandmother Ellen found out, she gave up quitting and blamed Mary.

Shortly after, my great grandmother Ellen died of lung cancer.

Grandma Mary spent the rest of her life refusing to even try to quit smoking again. She'd tell people she had tried but wasn't strong enough. No one corrected her, and no one believed her. The whole family believed she just could not live with herself succeeding. If she could successfully quit now

after Ellen's death, it would *prove* she could have quit earlier and maybe prevented her mother's death.

Stories are complicated when they're about someone who believes they are incapable of change. I lived with my Grandma Mary the last two years of her life, while they had to take out one of her lungs to give her a little more time. Nothing about it was simple. Nothing about it was easy. Her own lung cancer struggle lasted years.

Ultimately, it killed her.

I was honored to preach at her funeral, and deeply humbled to know I could stand in my pain and loss and still proclaim the Resurrection.

But I am haunted by the mental gymnastics Grandma Mary did to convince herself she couldn't change.

Our ability to change is one of the greatest and most fundamental claims of our faith. Scripture is filled with people who change. Change of heart is one of the primary ways God is able to build God's kingdom in this world.

In Genesis, we learn the story of Judah, the son of Israel. Judah had the idea to sell his youngest brother Joseph into slavery and lie about it to their father. This is only one of several stories of weakness about Judah that tells us he is a bad dude.

But twenty years pass. Joseph, who was sold into slavery, winds up with power and authority in Egypt and he has to decide whether or not to save his family from starvation. Joseph threatens to imprison his only full brother, Benjamin — the new youngest son in the family. Judah has changed. He's grown. He saw what *losing* Joseph did to his father. He's learned to care about those family connections and responsibilities. He offers to trade his own life for Benjamin's to spare their father the pain of losing his youngest son again.

It's only then that Joseph reveals himself, forgives his brothers, and saves his family.

The story about Joseph is inspiring. It's about the ability to change and become a better person. The memorable line comes when Joseph says, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good..." (Genesis 50:20), which in Hebrew reads closer to "what you meant for evil, God turned to good."

Joseph's story inspires. Judah's story inspires. God turns even bad actions to good on the societal level of pharaoh's court, and it also happens inside Judah's heart.

Judah has changed. Judah was willing to sell his brother into slavery and lie about it, but he grows and changes into someone who would give his own life to save his brother, to spare his father, and to redeem his own past evil.

There's no one-to-one parallel between Judah and Grandma Mary. But my grandmother lived believing she could not change and could not be redeemed.

And it killed her.

And we know that's true. Believing you are beyond redemption is one of the many ways to death, literally and figuratively. There is only one way to life. There is one way, one life, one truth. His name is Jesus.

And if we're going to follow Jesus, we really need to remember and believe we are capable of change.

Being able to change is not the only way God is building a Kingdom here on earth, but it is the fundamental one for the people living on the earth. God is doing things quite whether we're participating or not. But sometimes, as we know from Genesis, "what God turns to good" is through you and me choosing to become better than what we were.