

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 31 2019

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. These people who by very definition were not in right relationship with God. Jesus receives them, interacts with them! There were others who were near, the Pharisees and the scribes. Those who took their faith seriously, who followed God's law scrupulously. They grumble together about this warm welcome Jesus offers sinners and that he actually eats with them. Honoring them and, in that act of eating with them, establishing relationship with them.

Hearing the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus tells the three parables that follow this opening for them! But this parable, often called the Prodigal Son, is the culmination of the trio. There are many ways that you can read this text. But let us, today, look at it within the context of the Gospel, through the eyes of the intended audience of Jesus, the Pharisees and Scribes.

If you think about it, neither son in this parable is particularly admirable. The younger son at best takes his father's love and presence for granted. At worst, he could care less. In fact he demands his inheritance now- in effect saying to his dad, you're dead to me. The only worth you have is in your inheritance. He then goes to a far off (Gentile) country and wastes it in dissolute living: All those things that are contrary to Jewish law. Indulgence of all kinds of appetites, etc.

When the economy turns and he runs out of funds the boy takes a job feeding pigs to survive. But even then, he earns so little he considers eating the fodder for the pigs. We do not fully grasp how out of bounds this kind of behavior is.

Pigs are unclean for them. To even come in contact with them separates Jews from God, from their each other. To feed pigs, to even think about eating their slop is beyond degrading and shameful. Think of the worst thing a person could do in life and that is it. This detail would have deeply disgusted the listening Pharisees. Shown the younger son to be even more out of bounds.

The younger son is shameful, because he knows his father is his Father (look at his rehearsed speech) and he knows at the very least dad will take him back despite everything (talk about taking him for granted). But even with that he still denies that relationship in how he lives.

The older son isn't much better. Look at his speech when he comes back home. He does not even acknowledge his father as Father but rather reveals he sees him as his master (I've been working like a slave for you). He denies that he even has a brother (This son of yours...). His failure to go inside and participate in the party. To fulfil his obligations to help with the hosting and welcoming of guests. To even sit down at the table. All of this is deeply offensive and shameful in this culture. And in his own way the elder son is also denying relationship with the father.

The parable, in many ways, is about family break down. Both sons deny, in different ways, the relationship that exists between them and their father. The elder son even denies the relationship that exists with his brother.

The father is the only one who keeps that family relationship with both sons. Who doesn't care so much what the other does or even how they receive that consistent love and care, but who always runs out of the house, who crosses the threshold to go to his son. A father who loves each son so much he will do things

that would embarrass, even shame, any other land-owner; run to greet him, hug his stinky, smelly, pig slopping boy and restore him to his rightful place as son with no hesitation... despite the way he was treated by this child. A father who leaves the party he is host of and goes to his elder son. One who is also bringing shame by not coming in. Who feels wronged by the father. Treated as a slave...used purely for his labor and receiving no reward.

The father cannot imagine the banquet without each son present. His deepest desire is that each would be in relationship with him and with each other. The father desires only to celebrate with extravagance the fact that his younger son who was dead in almost every sense, has now come to life. The one who was lost (the word used can also mean destroyed) has now been found...is now known to them again. What he tells his eldest son is that this celebration is necessary...because the love the father holds for his children makes it so.

Think of the joy you feel when your children come home again when they have been gone. Think now of the joy you will feel if they were dead to you and have been restored. Could you keep from celebrating? From rejoicing? No. It's an imperative because of your love. This is the love of the father that makes rejoicing a necessity.

One good question to ask of any parable is, who am I in the story? Let us assume for the moment that God is the Father, that the action of the Father to cross the threshold for his sons is expressed in Jesus Christ. God who has crossed the threshold of heaven to come to earth. To be one with us.

Now, on any given day, we might be either of the two sons. How often do we turn our back on God? How often do we squander the inheritance that God has

given us (this beautiful creation, our intelligence, our creativity, the relationships we have with parents, siblings, friends) in dissolute living- the pursuit of things that feel good to us, but just waste the gifts we have? How often do we, at best, take our relationship with God for granted, “Oh, God will be there when I need God.” How often do we return to God after that time in far lands, with our prepared speech, “God if you just..... I’ll come to church more often.”? How often is that speech less than sincere, something we say so God will respond? Because that’s just what God does, right?

But note, it doesn’t matter what the younger son did, it doesn’t matter whether his return is brought about by a sincere turning around of his thinking or simply a desire for three hots and a cot. God, the Father, can work with that. It doesn’t seem to matter whether it is sincere or not. What matters is that you are here, in God’s presence, embraced by God without reservation, clothed again with the best robe (the waters of baptism?), given the symbols of being an inheritor (a ring on the finger, a sign of the cross on the forehead), celebrated with a sumptuous feast that the whole neighborhood is invited to.

Some days, we are like the elder son. Envious as we look at the younger son, gone off to do all the wicked things (play golf on a Sunday morning, having the “freedom” to do what you want). Angered by the fact that God still takes them back and throws a feast no less! How is that so? That’s more of my inheritance frittered away! Who looks at our work for the Father as slavery, a duty so tight upon us that there is no joy...only obligation (Come to church twice a week in Lent, pray, read scripture, help others) A son who has such a legalistic view of

how God works that there is no grace, who would gladly take the younger son up on his offer to be a slave and no longer an heir.

But note, the father comes out to this son as well. Comes out to invite him to the feast. Who assures him, “You are always with me and all that is mine is yours.” This feast comes from an endless inheritance and the banquet is one that you are invited to as well. In fact, it won’t be the same without you. Come, join the celebration.

Note also, the parable isn’t resolved. We don’t know whether the younger son truly had a change of heart and will once again be obedient to the father or if he’ll go off into dissolute living once again. We don’t know if the elder son comes into the banquet. Sets aside his own pettiness and petulance and goes to celebrate with his family; father and brother. Or if he storms off in a huff.

All we know is this; both are welcome at this banquet. Both are loved enough by the father that he will cross the threshold to them. Will do things that are anathema to any householder for the sake of having them both at the banquet. Because the banquet is not complete without both being there. Because the joy is in the return of a lost one, a destroyed one into the fold. A joy that is incomplete when there aren’t family members there.

This is the reality that Jesus is trying to get across to the Pharisees and as they are present as well, to the sinners and tax collectors who are over-hearing this story. We have a God who pursues us in love. Who wants nothing more than to be in relationship with us. Who rejoices in those who are diligently working the vineyards and fields of God’s creation and those who return from their sojourn into the wilds apart from God.

Our God does not care what son you are today. God only cares that you are here. At the table. Celebrating with joy the fact that we are together. This is the very nature of God that was so hard for the Pharisees and, in a different way, the sinners to understand. It is a reality we often find hard to understand. But we don't have to understand it. We just receive it, trust it, live with it. And... come to the banquet.