

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 27, 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

First, this parable is often called the prodigal son. The word prodigal means wastefully extravagant. I would agree that it is better to be called the prodigal father. Let us come back to that in a minute.

There is much to be said about this text, but what sticks in my mind today is the relationships, and how both sons miss the mark on their relationship with the father and each other.

For both, their relationship with their father is centered around what he can give them physically. It is a transactional view of the relationship. The value of which comes from prestige, goods, funds in exchange for being born to him, for their labor and obedience.

The first son sees dad as an atm- "I'm your son, you owe me! Give me my money!" In essence, he proclaims his father dead to him.

Dad does so and the younger son leaves with his fortune and goes to Gentile lands. Where he thoroughly scatters it in wasteful living. Think of those athletes or big lottery winners over the years we have all heard the stories about- who take their fortunes and spend it on stuff, give it away to others, throw lavish parties. Are prodigal with their windfall.

When his funds run out a famine hits the land and the younger son has to go to work for a citizen of that place, he is faced with eating with the pigs. Something that would have been deeply shameful to a Jew. Faced with all of this, he remembers the relationship his father had with his hired servants. That even they had food enough to spare! Now that his father is

dead to him- the son assumes his father will feel the same way and so he must create a different relationship. To do so, he plans to; 1) acknowledge his sin to God and to his father. Sorry about that. 2) Strike a bargain treat me like one of your hired servants! Again, transactional- I will give you this and you give me that.

The older son is no better- upon coming back from a day's labor in the fields he hears the sounds of Kool and the Gang and a big party. What's going on, he asks. He is told his brother has returned and his father is throwing a party to celebrate having him back safe and sound.

The older brother is, suffice it to say, pissed. He refuses to join the party. His father comes out and invites him to join the celebration. But the older brother refuses. "Listen to me old man! I have worked like your slave, obeyed your commandments, and you never killed a young goat so me and my friends could have a party."

Again, a transactional view of this relationship. I work like a slave for you (not even a hired hand) and do all you tell me, and you have not followed through on your part of the bargain. But this "son of yours" – note he denies any relationship with his own brother- comes back from devouring your very life's work on... prostitutes and you celebrate him! The older brother cannot conceive how this would be so- because he fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between his father and his younger brother, even as he fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between his father and himself.

Remember, both tax collectors and sinners as well as Pharisees and scribes are listening to Jesus tell this parable, so I wonder if it is not for

both groups. Because like each brother, they fundamentally misunderstand the relationship that exists between them and their heavenly Father as well as the one that exists between each other.

The tax collectors and sinners would have viewed themselves, and been treated, as the younger son- abhorrent to the older brother, to a society whose rules they broke, a sinner against God- disobedient to God's command, having basically said God is dead to them. Convinced they could never regain whatever special relationship they had with God.

The Pharisees and scribes were like the older brother- the ones who never left, who did the work they were commanded, who followed the rules, and who viewed any deviation from their understood way of how things worked to be abhorrent, an affront to their labor, what was owed to them because they stayed and followed the rules.

We can relate to both of those things, can't we? Why should they get a break when I followed the rules? There's no way I can get that because of what I've done. Even within our own familial relationships how often does it come down to this transactional way of thinking? I've done this so you owe me that. And does that lead to healthy relationships?

What Jesus has come to do, what he is trying to do here with both the tax collectors and sinners as well as the Pharisees and scribes is to get them to repent of their way of thinking about their relationship to God and to one another. Remember from last week that to repent means to change your thinking.

Jesus is telling them that relationships in the reign of God are not transactional, they do not keep count or record. There is nothing earned, but only what is given.

Jesus has told us just the chapter before that where our treasure is, there our heart is also. That our heart, the source of all that we do, follows that which we most treasure. What did the father treasure?

When his younger son basically said you are dead to me, give me my money. He took what would have been a grave insult in the culture of the day and gave his inheritance- to both sons.

When he saw his younger son returning, while he was still far off, the father runs to him. Something that would have required him to bare his legs, a deeply undignified, disgraceful act for a person of his station. He falls upon the neck of his son kissing him repeatedly. He calls for the best robe and ring (both signs of the relationship he has with his son) and for a great feast because his son who was dead is now alive! You can almost hear how he blithely glosses over his son's rehearsed speech, something that is irrelevant to his father. Whose love for him is not based on what his child did or didn't do, but because he is his son! Whose heart is with this treasured child. Who based on that relationship alone is worthy of indignity on his part, and to be given a robe, and a banquet. A prodigal response to his return.

Jesus is telling the tax collectors and sinners that they have naught to do but turn back and the Father's embrace will catch them around the neck, shower them with kisses, and welcome them back into the household with celebration- not recrimination, not probation, not on a lesser basis.

It is not about what you do or have done, but about the relationship that exists between us and the God who loves us with abandon. Who is wastefully extravagant with that love- prodigal one might even say.

What did the father treasure?

When his older son refuses to come into the banquet, staying outside because of who is at the table. The father leaves the banquet to go outside- again a disgraceful, undignified action in the culture of the day- to personally invite his older son in. To call him to the table and to rejoice.

When faced with the anger and indignation of his son. Who denies his own blood tie to the guest of honor, what does the father do? He calmly tries to help his older son past his “stinkin’ thinkin’” Son, you could have this party whenever you wanted. The relationship is not a reward for what you have done but because of the reality of who you are. My beloved child. All that is mine is yours already!

And then he reorients him to the relationship he has with the one inside, “this brother of yours was lost and is now found” why should we not rejoice? He is your brother, I love you both!

Jesus is telling the Pharisees and scribes that it is not about what you do or have done but about the relationship that exists between us and the God who loves us with abandon. Who’s inheritance we don’t have to earn but already have access to now. In this life! And he is telling them not to be envious over what the younger brother has been given, but to rejoice that one of their own has returned to the household! That this feast does not take anything from them but is what is available to them the whole time.

Friends, the love God has for you is not about what you have done or not done. It is about who you are- beloved of God and created in the image of God. Bearing the mark of the cross of Christ on your forehead.

You can have spit in the face of God and basically said God is dead to you. You could have labored for years in the mission fields on behalf of God and God will not love you one iota more or less.

Oh that our own relationships with one another were like this. That we found value in one another just because we were family, we were fellow believers, marked with the cross of Christ, that we were fellow citizens of this nation. That the core relationship was framed not by what we do, by what is in it for us, but because of our relationship- our love for one another. That we treasured one another with even a fraction of the prodigal love God has for each of us.

We pray each week that God's kingdom might come on earth as it does in heaven. We practice that kingdom each week in this Meal of Christ's own body and blood given in love for each of us. A banquet table where Jesus sits to eat with all of us beloved- sinner and tax collector, Pharisee and scribe. With those who feel they don't belong at this table and those who do.

Let us repent of this thinking that divides us, let us see ourselves and each other with the eyes of God. Let us come into the banquet with one another, to share a meal beyond compare, a fellowship divine, where our value- our belovedness is not because of what we do but because of who we are. Children, bathes in the prodigal love of our Father.

Thanks be to God.