

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday in Lent
March 31, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Proverbs 28:18-26

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father,
'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'

"So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said,

'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!

'I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him,

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;
I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

"So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him,

'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his slaves,

'Quickly, bring out a robe-the best one-and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'

"And they began to celebrate. Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied,

'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

“Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father,

'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

“Then the father said to him,

'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'”

Love: Have It Your Way?

One good thing about Lent is that the **lectionary** provides us with well thought-out scriptures for our study and hearing in worship. This well-planned selection of *Bible* verses and stories tells, and retells, the story of the **Gospel** and all that goes with it year-on-year. Today, the lectionary provides us with a familiar **parable**. It is so well known to us that it even gives us a little “warm and fuzzy” when we hear it. This parable, often called “**The Prodigal Son**,” is a story of fortune seeking, **recovery**, redemption, petty resignation, and **self-centered behavior**. It shows a father’s love, which readily can be compared to the **love of God** for all of humankind. All of these are good and worthwhile messages that can stand alone. But, there is much more going on here, and we will examine much of it this morning.

In order to place this story in context, we should remember that there are two parables within this chapter in *Luke*, which we did not read this morning: the **Lost Sheep** and the **Lost Coin**. Both of those stories express **God’s joy** and our own elation at discovering the cherished **love of God** for us and our own love for God. But, the writer of *Luke* uses those two **shorter parables** to lead us into a **deeper** and more foundational lesson. The story of the prodigal son features the rash decisions of a younger son, his older brother, and their father, who alone demonstrates this love of a parent for a child: **unconditional love**. This is just the kind of relationship we seek with God: a deep and lasting result that can result in our **transformation** both personally and in our faith and in **every aspect** of our living. Through this teaching of Christ, we begin to understand that God’s love extends far beyond mere joy. I believe that is why the preceding two parables are not included in our lectionary for **Lent**. Instead, our focus is, and should be, on the **forgiving nature of God** which we can glimpse only through **God’s grace** and **God’s gift** to us for our salvation in **Jesus Christ**.

Well, when we read this passage it is pretty easy to recall our experiences with immediate **family members** and directly compare our parents and siblings to the events and raw emotions depicted here in *Luke* 15. A pastor could pick a few verses blindly from the written page and come up with a pretty good **sermon** in short order. From overindulgent and extravagant parenting to forgiveness of transgressions, this parable is told often and is referred to as an example of good **moral behavior**, even by those outside of religious circles. And, for me as a parent this is one of the most lovely, durable, enduring, and endearing stories in the entire *Bible*. And, it is found only here in the Gospel according to *Luke*.

Like most of the parables, the story moves pretty quickly and is economically worded. A younger son wants to take his **inheritance** and strike out on his own. This is familiar territory for us. And, we understand the headlong rush of the younger son to move out of the house and go into the wider world. The young man receives everything he can inherit from his father. But, remember that since he is a second son, he never would receive as much money or property as the elder son would receive. That is the tradition at this time and persists in many cultures today.

The younger son leaves the home, the town, and goes to another country. After living it up for quite a while, our young man has nothing left. Lacking any skill for employment, he begins work as a **manual laborer**. We should keep in mind that a Jewish person cannot sink much lower than taking care of animals that are **unclean** by religious law, such as these pigs. Literally, he is doing the “dirty work” required in this job. We learn that he is hungry, possibly starving, and he considers further contaminating himself by eating the pigs’ food! If he did so, he would move himself further from Jewish law and, in the thinking at the time, **further from God**.

So, he does the sensible thing and **decides to return** to his father’s estate. This young man knows that this must go well. He **rehearses** what he will say. To my modern ears, the first line of the younger son’s apology sounds like it was lifted from a **12-Step program**. The reality is that this newfound humility is an **incomplete process**, and may never end.

“Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”

Luke 15:21 NRSV

Isn’t that you and me? **Imperfect beings** that we are? We would frame it differently, of course.

“I’m so far behind on my taxes- I’ll never get it done, even though I have refund coming! I’ll do better next year. On Labor Day, I’ll organize everything up to that point, then file each item monthly, and as soon as that W-2 shows up in mid-January, off it goes to the IRS- or the accountant.”

But, it rarely works out that way. There is always- next time. We mean well, but it is hard to stay **committed**, even to tax planning. On our own, that is how we handle **adversity**. Like the younger son, we are **repentant** and sincere especially over our shortcomings, our sins. And, typically this lasts until conditions change for the better, and we fall back to our wold ways.

Having read this passage a number of times, I now feel that this prodigal, younger son’s apology may be short lived. That is, he likely will regress and begin to spend money frivolously again. Quite possibly, his father could have thought the same thing for a brief moment. But, look at the father’s response:

“‘Quickly, bring out a robe-the best one-and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.”

Luke 15:21b-24 NRSV

Before the boy can complete the second sentence of his well-rehearsed speech and ask forgiveness, his father is already **elated** and overwhelmed. Following up on his headlong rush to greet him while his son was still on the road, the father shouts out commands for a tremendous **celebration**. He orders up the best robe and a signet ring: outward symbols of prominence and acceptance and **restoration** as a leader on the estate. However, these are just superficial aspects of his joy at the son's return and his son's exuberant acceptance of his renewed position in the household.

Something deeper is involved in the father's reaching out to this wayward son, showing the power and strength of the **unconditional love** a parent can hold for their child, even one as undeserving as the younger son in this story. We can understand this **father's love** in this situation, and it allows us to make the comparison to **God's love and acceptance** of us, as you and I remain **sinners** in life's story: the imperfect beings in God's good creation. Like the father, God loves us **unconditionally** and accepts us without our forming any kind of formal explanation or even outlining our own plan to improve our actions in the sight of God. But, as shown in the parable, none of that is truly necessary, because **God knows us** and **redeems us** through Jesus Christ.

And, in keeping with the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep, the parables that preceded our scripture lesson, the story could have ended right there. But, the author of *Luke* wants us to consider another aspect of our **relationship** with each other: the **family dynamic** illustrated here. Jesus is prompting us with God's view of humankind which is contrasted with our constant **focus on ourselves**, which is the response of the older son. By his own report, he remains loyal and obedient. However, this has come at a cost: He expresses considerable **anger** in confronting his father. Seeing the celebration and joy, the older son is piqued with **jealousy**. His words sting, and they all are directed at his father. Because of these strong emotions, he ignores the vital role of **mercy and forgiveness** that has played out before him.

“But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’”

Luke 15:29-30 NRSV

Did you consider this depiction of his brother: “This son of **yours**.”? Is the younger son a half-brother? Was the boy conceived outside of the marriage? We will never know, of course. But, things are not good between these two siblings. Apparently, they never have had any peace between them. Amazingly, his father reflects the anger and concern, but does something few fathers would do: He is **compassionate**, despite the affront and insult to his will and his authority.

“Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But, we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Luke 15:31-32 NRSV

In other words, the father sees the “big picture.” He will not allow his family to divide over property and possessions. We are confronted with an **intrafamily dynamic**, and it is goes

beyond property and position in society. There is **hatred** here. And, we soon understand that the older son is in the wrong: He is **self-absorbed**, spiteful, and **defiant**.

Isn't this where most of us live every day? We rarely stop to consider **our words** to another person, criticizing someone else's behavior, actions, or job performance. This parable should cause us to reflect on our **self-centered priorities** and actions. But, through the generous love of this father, you and I can see that God is working out something else here. Without **forgiveness and charity** in our thinking and in our living, our life is going to remain pretty miserable, tied up with endless conflicts and needless tension. And, without God it is unlikely that we can "work our way through" the tough times that always come around.

Well, we have concluded the story. And, we can easily see that most of the responses to this parable focus on the **joy** that we should feel as **humble participants** in God's kingdom, working for the mission and service that God has planned for us. But, isn't there **something missing** in this delightful tale of **work, worth**, and unmet **expectations**? We have laid out the dynamics of greed and impetuous behavior and taking relationships for granted. We have emphasized God's love and forgiveness. So, that leaves me with a question: **Where do you find yourself in this story?**

- I suspect that most **males** in our culture identify with one of the three males featured in the parable: One of the two sons and the father.
- But, if you are a **woman**, single or married, or a sister or mother, you probably have **another understanding of this parable**, one that would center on **emotion, exclusion, and repression**. And, you would be the first among us to notice that there is **no mention** of a woman or girl in this parable.

Unarguably, it is a story which is fully **dominated** by male characters in a strongly male-dominated culture that was present in all of Palestine and in Roman culture, as well. As a result, scholars note the **disadvantages** of a woman in this patriarchal society. Even in a stable home, a wife or daughter would be as **destitute** as the penniless son when he returned home. Women held **no property**. If they were Jewish, they could not own a store or farm. They received no inheritance from an estate. In Roman culture, women could own property and businesses. And, they could inherit an estate if the deceased placed it in the will, generally if there was no male heir. But, divorce was very common as individuals sought advantage through relationships, marrying and re-marrying at will through divorce decrees.

Obviously, the women of that time had **no voice** or position in society. And so, today many people see that **the women** of the time were just as deserving as the prodigal son standing before his father. Today, many others in our **society** have no voice, as well. We crowd them to the margins, but **ignore** the "Why?" and "How?" that placed them there. The inner cities have poor levels of education and extremely high unemployment. There are **no jobs** available within reasonable commuting distance, and the jobs that are available are very low-paying. Transportation and child-care take up most of the earned income of these individuals.

As we look into the **communities** around us, how do we **reflect** the love of God shown throughout this parable? How do we approach those **at the margins** of living? Can we affect change in **education** and gainful **employment** in these situations? By ignoring or rejecting them, are we not leaving them all eating the pig's food and living with them too, like the down-and-out prodigal son at his worst? Do we need a **push** from Christ himself to find **new approaches** to these centuries old problems?

In the Prodigal Son, Jesus Christ created a parable that demonstrates a love beyond that of a good parent. The father reacts as Christ would, with the **unifying love** which we find in God and Jesus. The response from the loving father in the parable is this:

“You are **loved**. You are my son- a **child of God**.”

This is love in its truest, ultimate form. It is the **love of God** for us all.

You and I know that we can love and love deeply. Instead, we love in a way that suits us, not necessarily God. We want to love, but like the old fast food commercial we **want it our way**. Instead, when we see the destitute, the lonely, and those at the margins of life and society we should be demonstrating the love of God and the **grace** of Jesus Christ.

As we continue to develop as **disciples** of Christ, you and I can paraphrase a portion of this story. We can say to those at the margins: “You are my brother and my sister.” Through this remarkable and familiar parable, **Christ** is prompting you and me to say:

“YOU are welcome here. THIS is God’s love.”

“**Welcome home!**”

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