

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 14, 2010
Fourth Sunday of Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joshua 4:19-24
Psalm 103:1-11
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Luke 15:1-32

In most bibles, the story from our Gospel lesson today falls under the heading of the parable of the “Prodigal Son.” This is not surprising, given that the bulk of preaching and teaching from this text through the history of the church has focused on the younger of the two sons. To call this the parable of the “prodigal son,” however, is to mislabel it, as we will see when we examine it more closely.

In addition, we must remember that this story is a *parable*, a unique type of teaching tool used by Jesus. Jesus told parables for a specific reason. His motivation was not to give people “warm fuzzies” and make them feel good. Rather, he told parables as a way of shocking people, of overturning the conventional way people saw reality and lived their lives. It’s hard for us to imagine this, but many of those who originally heard Jesus’ parables responded not with feel-good sentimentality, but with anger and outrage.

So, whose buttons is Jesus seeking to push here? We’ll discover the target audience for this parable a little later, but for now, let’s enter the story.

The story begins very matter-of-factly by telling us, “a man had *two* sons.” The story is about two sons, not just one. And when we read the story carefully,

we learn that *both* sons (not just the younger) are alienated and estranged from their father. They take very different paths; but the end result is the same.

The younger brother ends up alienated and estranged from his father by *breaking all the rules* and following a path of self-discovery. He becomes his own moral compass, and answers to no one. He casts off restraint, and lives life his way, on his terms. He's out for kicks, with utter disregard for any potential "kickbacks."

The older brother, by contrast, ends up alienated and estranged from his father without ever leaving the house. Ironically, he ends up alienated and estranged from his father by *keeping all the rules* and by following the path of moral conformity. He could pull out the rule book and show with pride his complete obedience to each precept and command. His mantra is: "all these years I've worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me."
(v. 29)

In the end, though, both sons are estranged from their father. Both are lost, and each is a long way from home.

Let's return to the text to see if they make it back.

We know the journey of the younger son, of course. He bottoms out, and decides to return home to seek his father's forgiveness and to restore some form of

relationship, even if that relationship takes the form of a hired servant rather than a son.

And the text tells us that when the Father sees him coming from a distance, he jumps to his feet and runs to embrace him and welcome him home. He hugs him, kisses him, and instructs the servants to bring the robe, the ring, and prepare the fatted calf. It is a lavish and extraordinary gesture. It is utter compassion. It is sheer mercy and grace.

By the way, if you look in the dictionary, Webster defines the word “prodigal” as: (1) Recklessly extravagant; (2) Having spent everything. It makes you wonder: who in the story is the *real* prodigal?

But while the father’s forgiveness toward his son is free, it has also come at a great cost. The younger brother’s forgiveness is free to *him*, but a huge price has been paid for it. That price has been paid, not just by the father, but by the elder brother.

There was no way the father could reinstate the younger son into the family like he does without great cost to the elder brother. For the younger son is now a rightful heir again to what was left of the severely diminished estate. And perhaps this is one reason the elder brother will not go in to the party and join the celebration.

But notice something with me. This parable is the third in a series of three found in Luke 15, all centered around the theme of lostness. Do you remember the first two?

First is the parable of the Lost Sheep, and second is the parable of the Lost Coin. In all three stories, something (or someone) is lost. But there is a striking difference between the first two parables and our text today.

In the first two stories, someone goes aggressively searching for what was lost. The shepherd goes looking for the lost sheep, and the woman goes looking for her lost coin, and even recruits others to help.

But in our story today, there is a departure. No one goes looking for the wayward younger son.

Many thoughtful readers of this parable have asked, “why doesn’t the father in this story go looking for his son? That’s what a responsible and loving parent would do, right?”

Indeed, someone *should have* gone searching for the younger brother, but not the father. Not in this patriarchal culture. In this culture, it was the responsibility of the *elder brother* to go and look for him. It was the elder brother who should have said to his father: “Dad, my brother has gone missing. He’s off doing God knows what. He has disgraced you and this family. I don’t know *where* he went or *what* he is doing, but I’m going to go and find him -- even if it

costs me everything I have. So don't worry, dad. I'll find him, and when I do -- I'll bring him home."

Brothers and sisters, I want you to hear the Good News of the Gospel this morning. In this parable, the younger brother gets a self-righteous Pharisee for an older brother. *But you and I do not.*

We have an elder brother who has not just gone to the next country to find us, but has come all the way from heaven to earth. This brother was willing to pay not just a finite amount of money to reclaim us, but paid the infinite cost of his own life to bring us back to the Father's house.

Author and pastor Timothy Keller puts it this way:

As our true elder brother, Jesus was stripped naked of his robe and dignity so that we could be clothed with a dignity and standing we don't deserve. On the cross Jesus was treated as an outcast so that we could be brought [back] into God's family freely by grace...There was no other way for our heavenly Father to bring us in, except at the expense of our true elder brother. [The Prodigal God, 85]

I've always been intrigued by how this parable ends. Although both sons in the story are wrong, and both are loved, the story does not end the same for each. The older brother's situation in some ways seems more serious, because he is just as alienated from his father, *but he is blind to his true condition.* He doesn't see it. He would be horribly offended by the suggestion that he is rebelling against his father's love and authority. But he is.

The younger brother comes to his senses, repents, and comes home. But as the story ends, the older brother is still standing outside seething in anger, his father pleading with him to come in. We are not told what he ultimately decides to do. The end of the story is open-ended, as if the conclusion is yet to be written.

Perhaps that's because of who Jesus' target audience is in this story. In the beginning of Luke 15, Luke tells us that there are two groups of people listening to Jesus. One group is tax collectors and sinners. The other group is Pharisees, those who do everything the scriptures require.

Can you guess which group Jesus addresses in this parable? It is the Pharisees. The elder brothers. Those who use their strict obedience to try to control and manipulate God, and in the process find themselves lost and far from home.

There is a third audience to this story, of course. It is us. Where are we located in the story, and with whom do we identify?

On this fourth Sunday in Lent, Jesus comes to us to remind us that God's love and grace are poured out on profligate, immoral nonbelievers, but also on self-righteous, obedient believers. Each are invited to change, and each are invited into the feast. And we have a chance to write the end of the story.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, let these words from John Newton open our hearts to his grace:

*One there is above all others who deserves the name of Friend;
His is love beyond a brother's, costly, free, and knows no end.
They who once his kindness prove find it everlasting love.*

*Could we bear from one another what he daily bears from us?
Yet this glorious Friend and Brother loves us though we treat him thus;
Though for good we render ill, he accounts us brethren still.*

*Which of all our friends to save us, could or would have shed his blood?
But our Jesus died to have us reconciled in him to God.
This was boundless love indeed! Jesus is a Friend in need. [One There Is Above All Others, 1779]*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.