

Sermon for Lent 4C
S. Stephen's, Providence
03/27/2022

*“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 15.32)*

+ In the Name of the Living God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We all love a good story –

and Jesus certainly knew how to tell a good story.

Today's story from the Gospel of Luke – the Prodigal Son –

is one of the more familiar stories in the Gospels:

it's even been called the Gospel *within* the Gospel of Luke.

It's been depicted in art through the centuries,

and it's a theme common enough in literature and film:

young man or woman doesn't like the way things are at home,

young man or woman runs away from home to a far off and strange place.

Things don't work out, said child realizes his or her foolishness,

and they return to the safety of home with a newfound appreciation for it.

The thing about stories, however,

Is that they tend to reinforce beliefs or values already held.

Whereas the story Jesus tells today is a parable –

And parables are used by Jesus

to upset everything we think we know about how the world works:

instead we are shown how God operates,

and what justice and mercy look like.

We are told that, “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

They didn't like what Jesus was doing.

It didn't sit well with their sense of propriety and right-ness.

These people who Jesus ministered *to* and broke bread *with*

were not the observant lovers of God and God's law –

these were not the faithful children of Israel in their eyes.

And so Jesus told them the parable you just heard – this story:

“A man has two sons.”

Well now, right away we know this is going to be a story about family –

something universal and yet particular to each one of us.

We aren't told anything about the mother, or any sisters –

(typical 1st c. mentality!) but I like to imagine they were there somewhere.

But in terms of land and property, the father and sons are all that matter, which is why when the younger son comes and says to his father,

“I want my inheritance now,”

He might as well have said,

“I wish you were dead. I have no use for you or any of this.”

Nice kid, right?

“I don’t want to work here and wait to inherit the land –

Just give it to me now so I can sell it and take the money – liquid capital.

I don’t care if I have to pay a capital gains tax on it.”

So then he goes off to some first century version of Las Vegas

in a far off country,

and he blows through it all in what we are told is “loose living.”

Now we aren’t told exactly what that is, but you can use your imaginations.

The King James version translates it as “riotous” living –

and the NRSV translates it as “dissolute living.”

(Frankly, I rather like the depravity implied by that latter translation.)

Either way, I’m sure he thought he was having a good time at first;

but he didn't anticipate that circumstances wouldn't always be favorable.

A famine hits the land, crashes the economy, and he has nothing.

So he hires himself out – the man of means is now begging for work.

He gets a job tending to pigs,

and feeds off their scraps of beans and whatever else.

Now remember, in Judaism, pigs are deemed unclean,

and as a good Jew he would not ever eat pork,

much less come into contact with such an unclean animal.

In short, he has fallen about as far as he can fall. He's hit rock bottom.

It's then that, as Jesus so wonderfully puts it, "he comes to himself,"

and realizes his best bet is to return home.

His inheritance is gone, though –

and he figures he no longer has status as a son.

After all, he basically wished his father dead,

and he has sold off a piece of their ancestral land;

but perhaps he can at least work as a hired hand on the remaining farm.

So as he heads back, he begins rehearsing the speech he's going to use.

You know the speech I'm talking about.

How many of us have done that?

When we know we have to come clean to someone

about the way we screwed up,

and we start polishing and practicing the phrases we're going to use

so that we can show complete contrition,

and maybe even evoke a little pity from the other party –

anything to take off the full force of their anger or displeasure.

The son settles on something like this:

"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."

Well, the son doesn't even get the chance to give the speech he's prepared!

We're told that while he was still far off –

just an indistinct figure on the horizon beginning to come into view –

the Father sees him and is filled with compassion,

and runs out to meet him.

The father who was so wronged runs out to meet the son.

Everything about the way the world is supposed to work,

and our own sense of justice and right relations

would lead us to believe the father would be more than justified

in letting the son come to him on his knees;

letting the son profess how awful he was, how wrong he had been,

begging forgiveness;

and if not forgiveness, at least a place to stay and work.

But the father runs out to meet the son, because he is so filled with love,

so filled with joy at the son's return.

And don't you think, that if the father noticed him from so far away,

then perhaps the father was keeping somewhat of a vigil –

that he had been waiting for the son to return, every day since the son left.

He had not harbored a grudge or dwelt on the wrong.

He simply wanted to see his son again – for him to return into his embrace.

Who among us cannot understand that impulse?

I'm not a parent yet, but I have parents –

and I know what it's like to be this son in some ways.

Maybe that's why this story is so relatable –

It deals with the family – the relationships between parents and children –

Stuff we can readily identify with and relate to.

The son who was gone and lost, is now home and is found.

He tries to profess his unworthiness – that speech he prepared –
but before he can get very far, the father embraces him,
puts a clean robe on him, and even a ring – the royal treatment!
He’s giving orders to all the servants to fetch things, invite the neighbors,
get the fatted calf and slaughter it
so that they can begin this feast of biblical proportions.
We would all be content enough if the story ended here.
It’s a happy ending –
and it already tells us something wonderful about God.
That God is a loving father always waiting for us with open arms,
always waiting to welcome us home when we have gone astray.
But it doesn’t stop there:
Jesus goes on to make a larger point –
because at this point, the older brother re-enters the story.
The older brother has been dutifully working his father’s farm –
he has stayed with him and been the perfect, faithful son.
Now I myself am an oldest child – the older of two brothers.
I tend to think of myself as the more responsible of the two of us –

not that my brother has ever gone off and squandered his inheritance
in dissolute living!

But I empathize with the older brother – the typical “straight A” student:
he’s done everything right.

So imagine his righteous anger when he hears music and dancing
as he comes in from working in the fields, still covered in sweat and dirt.

His father didn’t even manage to call him in

because he was so excited about his brother’s return!

Instead, he hears about it from the hired hands!

So, understandably, he gets upset.

“Look I’ve been slaving away asking nothing in return,
while he abandons us, blows through his entire inheritance,
and yet you still give him this royal welcome?

Meanwhile I’ve never received even a small handout
so that I can have some fun once in a while with my own friends.”

Now, if you notice here,

the older son refers to his brother as “This son of yours,” –

He wants nothing to do with him, or to acknowledge him as his brother.

He has severed the relationship – he is dead to him.

But this is where Jesus shows us what God is like,

And that he will not be boxed in or defined by our own expectations:

Because the father essentially says,

“Yes, I know. And I hear you.

But you’re missing out on the fact that your brother –

YES, YOUR BROTHER –

has come home.

He was lost, and is now found;

he was dead, and is now alive – and so we must celebrate.

And that doesn’t change the fact that all that’s mine is yours,

and that you will always be with me.

Nothing can ever change that.”

In other words,

the son has nothing to lose by joining in the father’s rejoicing.

My friends,

the good news of this parable

is that the mercy, grace, compassion, and love of God

are more vast and unfathomable than we can ever know or understand.

The store of his riches is so great,

and the depth of his love,

that we need not ever fear that there is not enough for us. (it's not like pie!)

God's will for all people is to know him and love him.

God chooses to love us, through no action of our own –

rather, his love is freely given,

and it is always God who reaches out to us first.

At the heart of the parable today is a story of reconciliation:

the reconciling love of God.

As we heard from St. Paul in our Epistle reading this morning:

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ.”

If we are of God, we are to be a people of reconciliation,

and to work for reconciliation among all God's children.

I don't know if you noticed,

but the parable today doesn't tell us whether or not

the older son accepted the father's invitation to embrace his brother.

The ending is almost like a TV episode cliffhanger ending:

the father standing there looking at his oldest son –

the son looking in at the party and the celebration,

standing at the doorway and unsure of whether to take that first step in.

And so it ends as a question to the Pharisees:

Will you join in God's celebration?

Or will you continue to doubt and question the reconciling work

that I, Jesus, am doing on the Father's behalf?

Finally, (in closing,) the thing that I love most about this parable

is that we've all been one of these characters at different times:

We've all been the parent who has tried to do the best for our kids,

and show them unconditional love, even when they willfully stray from us.

We've all been the younger son – the Prodigal Son:

we've all squandered what's been given to us at times,

or failed to appreciate the love from those who care and provide for us.

At some point we've all come to our senses, realized our foolishness,

and thrown ourselves into the welcoming, waiting embrace

of a parent, of a spouse, or of God.

And we have all been that oldest son – hung up on the wrongs done to us:
irritated by the sense that *those who have not worked* for something
have been freely given something that *we worked hard* to achieve.

We've been obedient and faithful – where's the party being thrown for us?

And yet the question and the invitation remain there before us:

Will we stand there in the doorway,

waiting to accept God's invitation to rejoice in that lost son or daughter
who is now home again?

Will we stand there in our fear and discontent?

Or will we come inside and discover that there is joy enough;

that there is love enough for all of us – grace enough for thousands.

More food. More wine. More dancing. More celebrating.

More than enough mercy and love, grace and compassion –

enough so that when we don't even know if we have it within us

to make that first move over the threshold, God says,

“I will provide it for you. Just take my hand and take that first step.

Come inside and join in the celebration. You're home.” Amen.

*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
calling for you and for me;
see, on the portals he's waiting and watching,
watching for you and for me.*

*Come home, come home;
you who are weary come home;
earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
calling, O sinner, come home!*