

Sunday, March 31, 2019
Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year C)
Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Today's Gospel lesson, commonly referred to as the parable of the Prodigal Son, is one of those stories that is so well known, so central to our life of faith, that it hardly needs any explanation. It is so foundational to our faith that many have referred to it as "the gospel within the gospel." In many ways, it sums up our fundamental understanding about God and our relationship with him. It is a story of disobedience. It is a story of losing one's way. It is a story of repentance. It is a story of unending love. It is a story of infinite mercy. It is a story of radical forgiveness. It is the story of death. It is the story of resurrection and new life.

Lest we miss the magnitude of what is being conveyed in the parable, it should be noted that what the younger son does is pretty bad. Downright abhorrent. In asking for his share of the inheritance from his father, who is still alive, the son is effectively saying he wishes his father were dead. To say he is breaking the commandment to honor your father is an understatement! And to cement the deal, he leaves home, cutting himself off from his family. What he then does with the money—blowing it on loose living—pales in comparison.

When he hits rock bottom, the younger son "comes to himself" and resolves to return to his father. He knows what he has done is unforgivable. He has no delusions that he can ever be called "son" again. Not after what he has done. But maybe, just maybe, his father will have an ounce of pity and at least take him on as a servant.

Despite all that the younger son has done, the father has never given up on him. It turns out he has been hoping against hope, waiting for the day his son would return. He continually keeps watch, hoping that one day, he might see his son on the distant horizon, making his way back home. And finally that day comes. But the father does not wait for him to get there. He runs out to meet him, throwing his arms around him, hugging him and kissing him and welcoming him back home.

The younger son launches into his well-rehearsed plea: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Lk 15.18-19). But before he can even finish, his father does the unexpected. He commands the servants to dress the boy in the finest robe, to put a ring on his finger, to put sandals on his feet. All of this indicating that he is being accepted not as a hired hand, but restored as his son. Not only that, the father commands that the fattest calf, reserved for the grandest of celebrations, be killed and prepared for a celebratory feast.

Despite all the younger son has done—disrespecting his father, wishing him dead, taking his money, squandering it on immoral and debauched living—the father forgives him. He not only forgives him, but he reinstates him as beloved son.

And of course, the message this is meant to convey is that no matter what we might do, no matter how much we might sin and turn away from God, he forgives us. He loves us so much that he willingly and joyfully welcomes us back, if we but repent and turn back to him.

Now, while this is most certainly a valid interpretation of the parable, containing an accurate expression of the truth of God's love for us, it really misses the point—at least in the context in which this parable is told. Jesus is actually telling this parable as an indictment against the scribes and Pharisees.

To get at what he is really saying, we need to look deeper at the parable. Because to this point, we have only dealt with two thirds of the parable. There is still the part about the older son to contend with. Because truth be told, the central figure of the parable is not the younger son. The central figure—aside from the father, who is key to everything—is the elder son. The real reason Jesus told this parable was to highlight the elder son—his attitudes and his actions.

To be honest, I have always been more interested in the elder son, perhaps because I am an elder son. Not that my sister was a prodigal by any stretch of the imagination. But because I sense that I am more like the elder son than the so-called prodigal. And I suspect that, if we are honest with ourselves, many of us are more akin to the elder son than the younger, prodigal son.

Now there's no denying that many of us, at some point in our lives, have our prodigal moments. Those times when we, through intentional action or even unconsciously, wander off in search for something seemingly better, for something that promises to give us life. And eventually, like the prodigal son, we come to ourselves and realize that we have gone down the wrong path. That we have pursued that which does not truly give us life, but instead leads to potential destruction. When that happens and we have the courage to turn back to God, knowing that even though we are unworthy, we are welcomed back into God's loving arms, with great joy and celebration.

But most of us are not currently in such prodigal situations. Instead, we may feel that we are more like the elder son—being faithful and doing what we are supposed to do. From what we see in the parable, the elder son is hard-working and conscientious, providing years of continuous and faithful service to his father and to the family farm. Unlike his irresponsible, deadbeat brother. He is obedient to what his father asks, honoring his father's every request. Unlike his disrespectful brother. He doesn't ask for anything. Unlike his ungrateful brother. He is morally upright. Unlike his licentious brother. Actually, if anything, he may be a little too self-righteous. But we'll give him that, for the moment. In short, he is everything his brother is not, except for one thing. He, too, is lost. Only he doesn't know it.

Because of his faithfulness and obedience, the elder son is assured of his father's good graces. He is assured that the remaining family wealth, the two-thirds that was left after his brother took his share, would be his. In a legal sense, it is already his. It is merely held in trust by his father. He is really set for life. But all of this comes at a cost. He has created a separation—a respectful distance—from his father. He has lost sight of what is truly important.

He gets so bent out of shape that his good-for-nothing brother has broken all the rules, done who-knows-what immoral things, has squandered a chunk of the family fortune, and then has the nerve to come home. And instead of being turned out as the worthless bum that he is, his father welcomes him back into the family. With a party no less. But here the elder son is, doing everything right, following all the rules, and he doesn't get so much as a goat barbecue. It violates all sense of fairness, of what is right. Know the feeling? He is feeling unappreciated, and as a result, resentful.

So he's not going to have anything to do with his brother. But by refusing fellowship with his brother, he is also refusing fellowship with his father—with the one who is inviting him in. He is every bit as lost as his younger brother. He needs to repent of the self-righteousness that separates him from his brother, and as a result, his father.

Now, while we may not be as extreme as the elder son, may not be resentful, there is always the danger of being so focused on doing all the right things, following all the rules, being unquestioning in our obedience, that we become blinded to what God is all about. It is easy to place our own expectations on others—to think our way or understanding is the right way, the only way. To become rigid, locked into our own way of viewing God and right relationship with him. One that is based on merit for our hard work. We often hold to the standards of the world where merit and justice are lauded over mercy, instead of the other way around. Creating our own sense of righteousness—of what it means to be holy.

The elder brother wants some acknowledgment of his faithfulness – even if only a goat. Sometimes we want a little acknowledgment of our faithfulness. But we get so hung up on the rules, losing sight of what it truly means to be in relationship with God. Our adherence to our own image of what it means to be faithful blinds us to what it really means. Blinds us to the fact that we cannot earn favor with God. Blinds us to the gift that God alone offers. Forgetting that God offers a different experience—one of his unbounded grace, freely given. As the father tells the older son, so God says to us, “You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Lk 15.31). That's what we need to continually remember. We already have God's love. We already have God's mercy. We are already part of the Kingdom. Nothing will change that. No one will change that.

At its heart, this is a story of resurrection. The younger son, in leaving the family, particularly the way he did, would have been considered dead to the family. His returning to them and being welcomed back by the father would have been a resurrection for him. As the father tells the elder son at the end of the story, “this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found” (Lk 15.32).

This is also a story of the potential for resurrection for the elder son. With the return of his younger brother, the family is made whole again. The family, which had been destroyed by metaphorical death, is now resurrected. The father, in inviting his elder son into the celebration of that renewed life, is inviting him into new life, as well. But there is a possibility he will not accept the gift of new life. We are left hanging as to what the elder son will choose—to

continue in the darkness of death by excluding himself from a place at the party, or to enter into the light of renewed relationship and new life that is being offered and embrace the extravagant gift of his father's love and inclusivity.

The incomplete ending of the parable of the Two Lost Sons is an invitation to reject the rigidness of the elder son, to reject the rigidness of our own perspectives, and to take the same attitude the father has toward the prodigal. That all are welcomed into God's waiting arms. This is a missional opportunity that invites—even compels—us to do likewise. To open our arms, inviting all to experience the joy of God's love, no matter who they are, no matter what they might have done. This is the invitation and the hope that is inherent in this Lenten season. That is inherent in the mysteries that await us in Holy Week and particularly at Easter.

Yes, the best part of the parable is the ending. The fact that Jesus does NOT tell us what happens. He doesn't tell us how the elder son responds. Because that means it's up to each of us to write our own ending—to stay outside while the party goes on without us, or to accept God's gracious invitation.