

Sermon for 4 Lent
March 30, 2025
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The Prodigal Son is a story familiar to most, if not all, of us, and it's familiar to the world as well. It's been filmed, made into plays, turned into dance, turned into song. I think this is in part because it has a mostly happy ending, where the prodigal son comes to his senses and returns home, to be restored to his family, most of whom are happy to see him. Just about everyone likes a good story with a happy ending – it feeds us, feeds our desire to see people doing well, living well, making amends and moving forward.

But that's not always the way life works, is it? We all know, and many of us have experienced, the pain of estrangement and broken relationships. Parents who are estranged from their children. Spouses who are estranged, even if they continue to share the same house. Brothers and sisters, like the older brother at the end of this morning's parable, who resent favor shown to a sibling and so turn away from the celebration to nurse their bitterness and their frustration with someone "getting what they don't deserve," even if they themselves have what they need. Of course, part of what that may mean is that those in the elder brother's place really haven't received what they need in one sense or another. But do any of us get exactly what we need... or more to the point, do any of us get exactly what we deserve, either for good or for bad? And how many stories falter and fail on this just point: that we get neither what we need nor what we deserve, at least in our own minds?

If I had to make a guess, I would bet that for many of us, that's why we like happy endings – because we know all too well how rare they are. Life often doesn't provide happy endings with unlooked-for grace and forgiveness. Quite often, the consequences of actions are insurmountable, and people don't get the chance to forgive and forget, to move forward with mended dreams and patched-up friendships. That's the way the world works, and that's the way human love often works.

But that's not the way God works, is it? That is not how God lives and loves. God always desires our return when we go astray, and God is always ready to throw the biggest party imaginable when we return to the fold. And when that happens, for us or for those we know, we find that this feeds us, feeds our souls as good bread feeds our bodies. Most of us are hungry for real bread, the bread of life, not the cheap stuff that is mostly air and preservatives. We want hearty bread, stick-to-your-ribs bread; and we want to be sure that others have their bread, too. That's a major part of the call of being a Christian, one of our chief delights as well as one of our chief duties: to make sure everyone knows that there is true bread for them as well, and to help them get that bread if at all possible.

Because in the end, it's not really about feeding ourselves, although that's important. We have to be capable of doing our work, and that means being spiritually and physically strong. But we are called to be physically and spiritually strong so that, as Paul tells us, we can be "ambassadors for Christ," people through whom God offers "the ministry of reconciliation" to each other and to the world. The Book of Common Prayer puts it another way: we are "to represent Christ and his church, and bear witness to him wherever we may be." And the truth is that we cannot do this

without being in right relationship with God and with each other. Even though it's very tempting at times to be the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, even though I bet we've all been there at some point in our lives, that's the very thing we cannot do. We cannot, we must never, look at God and God's love as if there's some limit to it, as if a party thrown for someone else means that there's less for the rest of us. That's part of the problem that's going on in the world right now: some folks are sure that other folks "having enough" will mean they can't enjoy their billions in peace. But that's not the way God works, and that's not the way reconciliation and ministry work. In fact, it's the exact opposite: being in right relationship with others, and especially being in relationships that have been reconciled at some point, is what empowers us and gives us more to give, is what gives us the energy to do the work for which we are baptized and commissioned.

Our call is indeed to be ambassadors for Christ, which means that we need to serve Christ in all we do and in everyone we meet; and we need to keep in mind that we may be the only practicing Christian that someone else ever meets. Which means we are invited to consider the following questions: How do we look to them? What kind of love do we show? Do we overflow with abundance and grace, living joyfully with what we have and sharing our abundance? Or do we grumble and mutter, and turn away from the party because someone else is getting more than we think they deserve?

Let's face it – in Christ, we are all getting more than we deserve. There's no one here that doesn't stand in the need of grace, in need of that true bread which gives life to the world. No matter who we are, no matter how good we try to be, no matter how diligently we work and strive, we'll never be able to earn salvation. The good news is that we don't have to – it's there for the asking. We ask in our collect this morning to be given the true bread of Christ; we ask in the Lord's prayer to be given our daily bread, with the understanding – too often passed over, or not said out loud! – that the bread we receive is a gift, not something we earn. We all are like the Prodigal Son, who doesn't deserve what his father gives him, and we need to remember that when we are tempted to be like the elder son and stand on our own righteousness. As Paul says, we need to remember that in Christ, we are a new creation; everything old has passed away, and we all begin with a clean page. Let's not immediately scribble over it with all our old resentments, but rather remember in gratitude what we have indeed received.

And having acknowledged our need, and having received that bread we cannot earn... now we need to turn around and give it to the world. Because it's not enough to be fed ourselves. In fact, that gets to be stale bread after a while! Our call is to feed others, to engage others in ministry, and it's amazing how often we find that we are fed in feeding others, that "it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in giving that we receive."

This is why we pray so often at the end of Eucharist "And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do." There is work to be done – there always is, and there always will be. In fact, there's so much work that it can be daunting, and seem hopeless, except for a couple of very important things. It is truly the case that God is in the work with us. It is truly the case that serving others, when done in the name of Christ, is a means of refreshment and spiritual renewal. It is truly the case that our ministries in this place will not happen unless we ourselves make them happen. And it is finally truly the case that it is these ministries which show to the world what kind of Christians we are – whether we are Christians in name only, or whether we are Christians who truly know what it is to be in relationship with God and with each other, and

who want to share that knowledge and love with all who hunger for that kind of bread, whether or not the world says they “deserve” it.

My call for all of us this morning is to spend these last few weeks of our Lenten journey continuing our spiritual disciplines, and also really thinking – body, mind, and spirit – what it is we have to offer here. I invite us all to think about our different ministries, all the ways we have to “be church” and be ambassadors for God. I invite us all to think about what we might do differently in this place – what we might try that’s new, or what we might dust off and make new in God’s eyes, especially as we prepare for Father Michael’s sabbatical and think about what we might try differently while he’s away.

I invite us all to listen to the Spirit whispering in our ears, nudging us toward a particular form of service or trying something new. And then dive in and give that existing ministry a try, or work to make a new ministry happen. Make a commitment to something that will last beyond this season, something that will feed you spiritually through your work for this place and for the world outside these walls. Be a source of bread to others, so that you yourself will be fed. The simple truth is that if we don’t use our ministries, our time and talent and treasure, to feed and serve others, then it won’t get done. We won’t be fed, and others won’t be fed. God has a feast ready and waiting for us and for the world. Separately and together, let’s put on our aprons and serve it forth.

Amen.