

4 Lent – Year C – March 14, 2010
Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
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The parable of the prodigal son presents us with a significant challenge. It is so familiar that it may be hard to revisit the story without our biases and preconceived notions blocking our view, or even tripping us up. For example, how many of us have become accustomed to hearing a traditional interpretation with the father in the story representing God; the elder son as the self-righteous Scribes and Pharisees; and the younger son as the repentant sinner. Most of us have also heard this parable from the perspective of one or more of the major characters. We may even have been invited to identify with one of them through what we have heard in the story, or by what we have experienced in our own family lives.

Then there is another common way of hearing this story, that which embraces the theme of salvation from the lost and found angle, or emphasizes the resurrection theme from death to life. If we are to believe Karl Barth, then the prodigal son in this story is Jesus, and perhaps we are meant to see the elder son as Satan – the one who rejects the Father. If we wish to adopt an allegorical approach, then no doubt Martin Luther would be delighted with the notion of the younger son representing justification by faith and God's grace, versus the eldest son looking more like the doctrine of salvation or righteousness through works. The way that this story is presented to us today with the opening sentences, a bunch of missing verses, and then the story of the father and his two sons also points to Jesus' justification for his association with sinners and tax collectors.

Even while these approaches to unpacking this parable are probably familiar to us, I want to propose something different. Something that I think undergirds each of these perspectives, and yet one that seems to have been barely touched upon in each of the traditional interpretations. Before we get there though, we also have to acknowledge that these more conventional perspectives have each done an injustice to this parable by removing it from its first century Jewish context. Some of that is sheer neglectfulness, but rather more of it stems from a lack of humility on the part of centuries of Christian teaching, especially with respect to the position of our Jewish brothers and sisters. After all, it is they who are God's chosen long before any gentiles are grafted into the tree of life. This season of self-reflection and God's call to study the Scriptures also reminds us that no one has all the answers; that we still see through a glass darkly; and most importantly, that when we pray for discernment, even the most familiar of Bible stories still has the power to surprise and transform us.

Within its context then, the parable describes Jesus surrounded by groups of leaders, supporters and doubters. Each would recognize some familiar themes in the story Jesus tells, as well as some scandalous character portrayals. Contrary to a purely Christian perspective, it is implicit that the majority of Jesus' listeners would identify with the younger son in this story. It is well documented that the Jewish notion of sin could be defined as any violation of Torah, otherwise known as God's commandments. As we saw in the recent story of the fig tree, Jesus would agree that people do sin, but He would go further in expanding our sinfulness to define it as a basic condition of humanity's fallen state. As Jesus knows, human sinfulness is not something that we can remedy by ourselves, refrain from by any act of will, or by perfect observance of Torah. It just can't be done. Soaked in the teachings of Jesus, you and I would agree, and go further, celebrating the joy of our forgiveness in faith by virtue of Christ's righteousness, and through God's grace and mercy.

The request of the younger son to receive his share of the inheritance, whilst clearly presumptuous is not without precedent. It may even be considered shameful or sinful because of the dishonor to his father. In asking for his inheritance, he is basically telling his father that he wishes he were dead. Jesus' audience would have been quite familiar with the whole scenario. The paterfamilias in the position of power; the younger son liquidating his smaller share of the inheritance; and even the fact that he leaves the area to seek a better economic climate elsewhere. Famines were also common in

that era. Finding himself penniless in a place where almsgiving is not usual, without any apparent access to help from a Jewish community, combined with his day laborer job tending pigs, we can safely say that the young man is in gentile territory. In the mini-exodus of the son to a far off region, the original audience would also have heard the parallels to Israel's experience in the wilderness, and their liberation from slavery in Egypt. The history of the Hebrew Scriptures is also replete with God's call to repent and return to the Lord. As ridiculous as it is for the father to run out to meet his son it may echo the words of the prophet Malachi (3:7), when God comes out to meet the repentant saying, "Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts."

What *is* provocative for the Scribes and the Pharisees is highlighted in the opening sentences. Jesus is eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors. You and I, have to be aware that hospitality and table fellowship in first century Judean culture was considered an act of honor, kinship, and acceptance within the community. Through the parable, Jesus presents a new vision of God's kingdom, where the call to repentance is fully inclusive, and no one who repents is excluded from the Messianic banquet, at least on God's account. Jesus is therefore rejecting the Judean leaders' critique of his eating companions. Even challenging them to see that their understanding of righteousness is in question, and not in accord with God's will for the community. In effect, Jesus is telling them that they needed to see the bigger picture, the one according to God's will and not their own suppositions.

In the slightly broader context of Luke's gospel account, Jesus' mission statement has already been shared from his reading of the prophet Isaiah, including release to prisoners, and good news to the poor and oppressed. Throughout His ministry Jesus taught, and healed many who were sick. Knowing that, we have to ask ourselves in what way is Jesus teaching you and me through this parable, releasing us, and healing us. One other way to look at this passage is in the relational interactions. Each of the characters has something to say to the others by word and example. The father indulges the youngest son with lavish favoritism, in a way that reflects the Biblical precedent set in the history of salvation. However, in doing so, he foolishly jeopardizes the livelihood of his whole household for the sake of pleasing a son who repeatedly dishonors him without rebuke. The father also alienates his eldest son by his words and deeds, and especially by throwing a massive party for the younger brother without indicating that there will be any punishment for his imprudence. On the other hand, the eldest son speaks resentfully of what he perceives to be the reality of his own life of joyless slavery. His blinkered view does not see or appreciate the abundance all around him. Bound and gagged by duty and perfectionism, his tongue finally escapes when he challenges his father's lack of dignity and self-control, as well as his judgment. Unlike the dutiful eldest brother, the younger son is rude and reckless. He disowns his family, and squanders all the gifts that he has been given. Despite his carefully planned speech of repentance, he stops short of actually fulfilling what he has pledged to do. Instead, he readily accepts his former status without objection or any real demonstration of remorse for his appalling behavior. Thus further inflaming his older brother's anger and feelings of injustice to breaking point.

The relational lessons undoubtedly highlight humanity's imprudence and ingratitude, foolish attachment to worldly goods, and our seeming inability to put God first in all things. Yet they also show us that we each have the capacity for unconditional love and compassion. We have the ability to recognize and share the abundant gifts of grace and mercy. And that we too are co-creators with God in the divine desire for unity and reconciliation. The story is open-ended. Our lives are open-ended – pregnant with the possibility for change. The parable leaves us with the invitation to pursue healing in our own relationships. Finally, we are invited to come humbly to the banquet, God's table, where we are strengthened and filled by God's love, and experience our release to serve Christ in others.

Amen.