

“The Prodigal”
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2010 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A teenage boy had just gotten his driver’s license. He asked his father if they could discuss use of the family car. Dad said to the son. “I’ll make you a deal. You bring your grades up from a C to a B average, study your Bible a little, get your hair cut and we’ll talk about the car.” The shaggy-haired teenager thought about it for a moment and said, “Okay.” After about six weeks his father said, “Son, I’ve been real proud of you. You brought your grades up. I’ve seen you studying your Bible. But I am really disappointed that you haven’t gotten your hair cut.” The young man paused a moment and then said, “You know, Dad, I’ve been thinking about that. I’ve noticed in my Bible studies that Samson had long hair, John the Baptist had long hair, Moses had long hair and there’s even a strong argument that Jesus had long hair.” His father replied, “Did you also notice they all walked everywhere they went?”

Oh, how we all love parent/child stories. The good ones remind us of all the parent child relationships, for better or for worse, we’ve experienced in our own lives. They hit home.

Our focus this morning, taken from Luke’s Gospel, is about parent child relationships.

If there were a contest to name the top ten parables of Jesus, the one we heard in our Gospel reading today would make the list. By all accounts it would top the list. The parable of the Prodigal Son is considered the best known of all the parables.

It all starts when the Pharisees and scribes, authority figures in their own right, take a look at Jesus and say among themselves. That brash young upstart – he’s keeping the worst company – sinners, tax collectors – the trash of the social heap. Even eating with them. Jesus hears them and responds with a parable.

It has held the name “The Prodigal Son” for centuries. But maybe that name misses the real target.

Oh, how we love to focus on the bad boy of any story. He catches our interest. We follow his travels and escapades wondering what’s going to happen next. He’s the most exciting character. And then, bad boy hits bottom and returns home. From afar the father is waiting. He rushes to welcome his son home. We give a sigh of relief if we are romantic. We wait for the next chapter suspecting that the rosy picture won’t last long if we are jaded.

Big brother isn’t too happy. But he doesn’t appeal much to us anyway – too dull, too predictable, seems to be a grouchy, complaining sort. The story seems to end with bad boy turned good, feasting away in his new clothes, Mr. Popularity. But it really ends with what’s happening, or not, with the elder brother. Outside of it all, green around the edges, feeling that life’s not fair, standing there isolated from his father’s love only an arm’s length away.

If we spend all our time on the two brothers we will be diverted from the heart of the story. It’s really not about them – this parable – it’s really about their father.

When we play the game, “Who am I in this story?” predictably we think we’re supposed to identify with the younger son, examine our sins, repent and come home. Isn’t that what the parable wants us to do? What Jesus wants us to do? And what we’re supposed to do in Lent?

Some, choosing an also interesting path, take on the role of the elder brother and explore what that feels like – being the dutiful one, staying home and taking care of things but becoming resentful, heart hardening over time.

No one I know who’s played this game has ever elected to be a pig. One of my seminary sisters adopted the role of the fatted calf in class and that was quite interesting. But I and some others I know have considered the role of someone not even acknowledged in the story: the mother. I assure you that is a character to stir your emotions.

Few folks ever consider being the father – somehow knowing that of course Jesus is using the father as a symbol for God and to feel our way into that character seems a bit blasphemous.

But, I think it’s what Jesus wants us to do. To focus on the father. To imagine what it would be like to be the father and to respond to things the way the father does. To think about what having such a father in our lives would be like. To think about what it would look like to be even a little bit like that father in all our relationships.

The father in the parable is “over the top” we might say. In first century eyes no Jewish father would, if he were in his right mind, give away his inheritance before death. The son who asks for his inheritance is saying, in effect, “Dad, I want you dead right now.” What kind of father would play into that? And, no matter how much the father loved the son who turns his back on him, no self respecting 1st century Jewish father would catch up his robes and run, arms outstretched, to greet any child, much less a disgraceful, profligate one. Rather, he would stand, arms folded, face stern waiting for that child to approach him. That would be what would have been expected of the father.

We need to look at the word “prodigal.” It is defined in the dictionary as “recklessly extravagant.” I remember my New Testament professor in seminary suggesting to us that this parable really ought to be called, “The Prodigal Father.” The father in this story is recklessly extravagant with his love. He is really the prodigal. His extravagant love is what this story is all about.

Jesus tells this parable to help us grasp just how immense, how shamelessly, recklessly extravagant, is the love that our Divine parent has for us and for all his children – even the tax collectors, the sinners, the lowest of the low in the trash heap society rejects.

We are all alike in God’s eyes in one special way – we are all, each one of us, loveable in God’s eyes – no matter what we have done, or not done. God is the prodigal – extravagant and yes, even reckless, with his love – no matter where we are – coming closer to his heart or trying to run away from it.

The world markets loveability. The world around us is trying to get us to buy its list of loveable characteristics. Loveability is an idea that sells products. It’s so easy to judge ourselves

and others according to the world's views of loveability. And it can be expensive, financially and psychologically, to get on that treadmill of trying to "buy" loveability.

What Jesus offers us in this parable today is a view of pure unconditional love, something we don't have to buy. We just need to place our spotlight on our Divine Parent, not our worldly marketplaces, as we live out the stories of our lives. Divine love can take and make loveable what we may believe is, by any other standards, unloveable, even ourselves.

Love able, that's what our Divine parent desires for us – that we are able to feel and receive his love – and then, in turn, that we become able to love others as he has loved us.