

March 27, 2022

4th Lent, Year C

Joshua 5: 9-12

Psalm 32

Luke 15: 13, 11b-32

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "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."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was

going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.'

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Over a couple of decades of preaching, folks have often asked questions about scripture, been puzzled by passages, even been challenged or offended by the words of the Bible, but the passage that folks have told me most often that they dislike is today's: when Jesus offers the parable of The Prodigal Son.

Concern for the older son is the focus of most of the comments I have heard. Folks have told me they empathize with the older son, who has worked hard and never been a disappoint to his father, but then it is the reappearance of the younger son who, the passages tells us so eloquently, "devoured (the father's) property with prostitutes", who gets a party!

Sympathy for the older brother, a "this is not fair!" is the response of those put off by this parable.

So!

Today I'm going to try and help us hear this story with new ears, and to notice perhaps some missed details.

First, we tend to hear the parable by itself, as a story alone. But the introduction of our lesson reminds of what leads Jesus to tell this story:

"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. So Jesus told them this parable:"

Or, even clearer, is The Message version of this passage:

By this time a lot of men and women of questionable reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story.

Thus we can see that Jesus had a specific situation that led him to tell the parable, well, actually three parables. Our text does not include them all, but they are familiar. First Jesus tells of the Lost Sheep, then The Lost Coin, and finally The Lost or Prodigal Son.

And all are told because, as the passage notes: "*Their grumbling triggered this story.*"

The Pharisees, religious teachers, do not like that Jesus is including those that are seen as outsiders, the outcasts, the worst. Some writers interpret this as a condemning of the Jewish teachers, but we are all guilty of what the teachers just happen to demonstrate in this moment of grumbling.

Human sin can be seen most vividly in our craving to draw those lines of us and them, in and out, worthy and worthless. Over and over the church has been just as guilty of this limiting, this shrinking of God's love and mercy. The church wanted to leave out foreigners, women, those who are black or brown, those who are native Americans, those who are gay or lesbian, those who are....on and on. Over and over the church has drawn lines of acceptable and unacceptable, and then finally realizes Jesus broke all those lines and welcomed all to his table, and maybe we should try doing that too. Jesus told the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son to draw us away from those lines of us and them that we treasure, and point us towards God's love, mercy and forgiveness.

Ok, on to the second detail in the reading for us to perhaps notice with new eyes. The story is known as the Prodigal Son, but one commentator wisely noted the three parables can also be known by the numbers:

The 100 Sheep

The Ten Coins

And.....

The Two Sons

The focus of the story leans strongly, the action of the story focuses on the younger son, who demands the inheritance and goes off and quickly wastes all the money in far off places, feeding his addictions and buying friends. The majority of the text tells his story, and when he finally “*comes to himself*”. And the finale of the story seems to be in the joyous reunion of father and younger son, the one thought dead is alive, the metaphor for God always waiting for us to “come to ourselves”, to turn again, to return again to our God, and know God’s mercy awaits us.

But then there is what can feel like an afterthought, but is crucial to the story; the older brother’s anger, and his refusal to come into the party.

Hence the better title: The Two Sons, even more The Two Lost Sons.

What has the older brother experienced? The text tells us of his anger and his emotional conversation with his father. But what have the older brother’s days been like since the younger son took his money and walked out?

No doubt the younger son’s actions hurt the father; did the older son worry over his father, and his brother? Is his anger in the story the culmination of trying to do the work of two sons to console his father, did he love his younger brother and grieve his leaving, did he worry over his brother who had perhaps always shown signs of overindulging, was already slowly killing himself with addictions and clouded judgment, even before he left home?

And then do the days, months and years drag on? The father always watching and hoping for a younger son long gone, the older brother worn down by years of grief, love and now broken, by all he cannot fix?

We do not know but we can hear in the older son’s words, that something has broken when he comes home to a party.

The older son is lost too, in a different way than the younger son.

His response to the father pleading with him to come and join the party, is to yell and sulk that he never got a party. But could the sulking cover his grief over all the years of trying to keep things together, trying to do enough?

The older son needs to be welcomed and healed as much as the younger son; they have both been lost for years.

A family dealing with addiction of any kind knows that the disease affects not only the person addicted, but also all the other family members.

And getting to rock bottom, getting to the point when the person addicted is

ready to accept help is an agonizing journey for all involved.

The two lost sons.

Both of them, and all of us, needing to know that God waits for us patiently, that the door never closes no matter how far we wander, how lost we are, how angry and stuck we are, God's mercy, God's love, God's grace are never lost to us.

“(L)et us eat and celebrate; for this (child) of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

The two lost sons, a parable told to help us to see our God more clearly, so not like us, thanks be to God.

“He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” Their grumbling triggered this story.”

Amen.