

Sermon: Lent IV, Year C, March 6, 2016
Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church Richmond VA
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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.'"

The parable we just heard is most often called ‘the parable of the prodigal son’ meaning ‘the parable of the lavishly spending son.’ It could also be called, I think, ‘the parable of less than perfect family dynamics.’

This is a parable with three stories in it. It has a father and two sons. It seems to me to have two whining sons.

The younger son is whining because he wants money, his inheritance, and to get away from home and have a good time. How often have we wanted those things too?

The second son, the elder one and the one I imagine most of us find the most interesting, is whining because he thinks life is treating him unfairly. He wants justice. He is mad because he thinks his younger brother is getting something that he hasn’t gotten. How often have we gotten jealous or mad because life feels unfair?

In between the stories of these two sons, we have the story of the waiting father. Perhaps the parable should be called ‘the parable of the waiting father.’ “No other image has come closer to describing the character of God than this waiting father, peering down the road longing for the son’s return, then springing to his feet and running to meet him. In Jesus’ time, it was regarded as unbecoming or a loss of dignity for a grown man to run.”¹ Yet this waiting father runs. He was so moved by compassion, that his joy carried him down the road to his younger son.

And the father’s words in verse 24 sum up the first part of the parable: “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” The younger son was dead because he had broken his relationship with his family, and put a fence around himself. He wanted his inheritance before his father died which in that culture was saying to his father, “You are dead to me; give me my share of the inheritance now.” Quite a slap in the face. He then left his home to live with the Gentiles. Another slap in the face. But he returns, and because of his father’s lavish love and mercy, his place is re-established in the family.² The lost has been found. It is time to celebrate.

And this celebration propels us to the second part of the parable. It moves us to the elder son.

The elder son is also breaking family relationships and putting up fences. Just as his younger brother did by demanding his inheritance and leaving home, the elder son is building fences by denying relationships - he doesn’t refer to his father as ‘father,’ and

¹ New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume IX, Abingdon Press, pg. 302.

² Ibid. pg. 303

he doesn't refer to his brother as 'brother' but rather "this son of yours." And he refuses to come to the celebration.

His father also goes out to the elder son, extends his hand to him, and invites him to join the celebration. Here then is the climax: What will the elder son choose? That is the question we're most often left wondering about. Despite the parable being named for the younger brother, it is the elder one who is the focus, and the one that I think Jesus is pointing us towards.

Will the elder son go into the celebration for the return of his younger brother? Will he go in and party or will he go back to the barn and pout? Will he tear down the fence or keep it up?

Why is he rejecting the celebration? His brother who was lost is found, the brother believed to be dead is alive. Why is the elder son so twisted in knots? What has happened to this elder son?

First, the elder son has seen his younger brother go off with his share of the family money, and spend it on wild living while he is left at home to work. And then he hears that this younger brother has come to himself and realized his mistakes, the fences he's set up, the relationship's he's broken. This younger son has consciously chosen something different from life with the swine, and by doing this and coming home he has set in motion the choice the elder brother now faces.

Second, the elder son sees and hears that his father has been standing on the front porch watching the road, has seen his son coming, and has run to meet him. He's folded him into his arms and kissed him. And before the younger son can even finish his rehearsed speech, the father says"

'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' (verses 22-24)

And the party begins.

And finally, the elder son hears the party noises, and the servant tells him what has happened. And his reaction is one of anger, jealousy, and resentment. He feels that the younger brother has received something that he himself has never received. He feels more deserving, and that he is being treated unfairly.

Then [the elder son] became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ 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.³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' (verses 28-30)

Envy and resentment dig deep into us sometimes, don't they? They dig in and they can turn us angry and bitter. When we feel slighted we can add another notch to our bitterness fence. It even feels good – feeling justified can feel good. When we feel that others have gotten something that we haven't, we can become resentful and bitter. When we feel that something was taken away that should be ours, we can become defensive and angry. When we feel that God has shown more mercy to others than to us, we can add another notch to our bitterness fence. The fence can become so high that we shut ourselves off from relationships and community. And we shut ourselves off from God's lavish grace and love. Sometimes it seems as though we've learned how to protect our rights better than value our relationships.

A Jewish story tells of the good fortune of a hardworking farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God's lavish goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. ³

Bitterness and resentment can dig deep in us sometimes, can't they? Life very often doesn't seem fair; shoot, sometimes life isn't fair. But the question is: how will we deal with it? What choice will we make?

³ Ibid. Page 298.

I want to put to you today that THAT is the crux of the parable - for the elder brother and for us. What will we choose? Will we choose to join the celebration or return to the barn and pout? Perhaps this should be called “the parable of what to choose when life seems unfair.”

As my NT professor in seminary said, “sometimes grace is a kick in the back side.” Both of these sons have been kicked in the back side. The younger one recognized it; he came to himself, he tore down the fence and came home. Will the elder one recognize it?

What this parable invites us to do is wrestle with that question: will WE accept the outstretched hand of God, and join in the celebration of God’s love and mercy? Will we join in extending our hand in generosity to others? Or will we build fences? Whether it is in our homes, our offices, our neighborhoods, this city, this country, or this church, God is inviting us into the celebration, into the participation of accepting and extending his love and mercy to others. God is inviting us into a life of generosity of spirit. God is inviting us into extending his lavish love to others.

Our new vision statement is that “every member of Grace and Holy Trinity Church will joyfully celebrate God’s love and share the transforming power of that love in the church, in the city, and in the world.” God is inviting us into that power. Grace and Holy Trinity Church is inviting you into participating in that transforming love. You are being invited to let your joy and love carry you into transforming the lives of people in the church, this city, and the world. What will you choose?

Close your eyes for a moment, and picture what I’m going to read to you.

You are walking alone down a long dusty road. You look up ahead, and see God standing on the front porch of a lovely home. God is looking down the road. God is watching for you. As you approach the porch, God reaches out his arms to you. God springs off the porch and runs to meet you beckoning you into his embrace. Feel yourself enfolded into God’s arms. God whispers in your ear: “You my child get lost over and over, but my hand is always reaching for you. I always love you. I am always on the porch watching for you. What is mine is yours. Come. Take my hand. Come in to the celebration. Come. [Amen.]

Sources:

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