

Message for March 27, 2022

Lent 4

Luke 15:11-32

It is said that a student in a theological college was once asked to prepare an outline of how he would preach on the well-known Parable of the Prodigal Son. The student said that his sermon would have three main parts: badness, sadness, and gladness. Each of these parts in turn would have their own subdivisions. His nine-point sermon would then go something like this: the prodigal son spent his time caviling, traveling, and reveling. When the good times ended, he went to the dogs, ate with the hogs, and lost his good togs. Then when he came to his senses and went home, he got the seal, ate the veal, and danced the reel!

Well, this is one way to preach on today's scripture passage, but I would say that its focus is far too narrow. In fact even this parable's traditional title, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son", largely misses the point of what Jesus was saying. It does because this parable isn't just about the younger son; just as importantly it is also about his older brother and father as well.

This famous story centres around a man and his two sons. One day the younger son came up to him and demanded his half of the estate. Since we have heard this story so often we are not particularly shocked by his demand, but think about what he was really saying. "I know Dad that when you die I will inherit half the estate, but I can't wait that long. I want it now!" What a terrible thing to say but while the father must have been hurt by his son's callousness, he gave him what he had asked for.

The younger son then left home with his riches and went off to a far-away country where his life was 'party time big time', but then the money ran out and so too did his friends. He had to get a job and when he did, it was one of the most degrading jobs imaginable for a Jew, looking after a farmer's pigs. The pay was terrible and he was hungry all the time. At this point he came to his senses and decided to go home, reasoning that it was better to live at home and be one of his father's servants than to keep on going like this.

The young man though had a problem. After what he had said and done, would his father ever take him back? All the way home he rehearsed his

speech, but his worry was all for nothing. When his father saw him coming, he ran out to greet him, smothered him with kisses and showered him with presents. Then, as if that wasn't enough, his father also decided to throw him a great big welcome home party. And this is where many people like to end this story, but this is not where Jesus chose to end it.

While the party was still in full swing, the older brother got home from work and to say that he was not impressed would be an understatement; indeed he was absolutely furious! Why he was the responsible son, the good son, the hard-working son, but his father had never thrown him a party! And how could his father just take his brother back after all that he had said and done? He decided that there was no way he was going to go in and join the party!

Well aware of his eldest's son's feelings, the father went out and tried to reason with him saying that they should be happy because his brother was now home safe and sound. Besides he, the eldest son, would still inherit all of the remaining estate. The son however remained angry, and the depth of his anger is revealed by the language he used. When speaking about his younger brother he did not refer to him as 'my brother' but rather as 'your son'. He would not acknowledge any sort of relationship with his brother whatsoever, and this is where the story ends. Was there a happy ending? Were they all reconciled? Or was the older brother now estranged? We don't know and it is left to us to supply the answers.

So goes one of the best-known and, I would say, one of the most shocking stories that Jesus ever told. There is the callous self-centred behaviour of the youngest son, at least until he came to his senses. There is also the harsh, judgmental, unforgiving behaviour of the eldest son. But while their behaviour may be shocking, surely it is that of the father that is the most shocking of all. The one son treated him like dirt and then messed up his life big time, but that didn't matter; 'welcome home!' The other son's behaviour was less than admirable too, but that was okay; 'come on in!' Was this father a saint, a fool, or something else? That is up to us to decide, but that father does represent someone else; he represents God, and that is the most shocking thing of all.

There are times in life when we are a bit like the youngest son. We stray far away from our spiritual home and Father, wasting our lives and squandering our inheritance; the gifts and abilities that God has given us. But while we may sometimes be like the younger son, there is perhaps an even greater danger for

us in the church to be like the oldest son. Like him we at least try to be good people but what is our honest reaction to those who, like the younger son, are unfaithful to God and are cheerfully squandering their God-given talents and abilities, having a devil of a good time? Do we look at them with compassion? Do we pray that they may come to their senses? Would we or even do we welcome them when they do come home? This question is posed by the American preacher William Willimon in his re-telling of today's scripture passage.

“We had predicted it. At age fourteen she was on the rear end of a Honda, screaming up and down the street as if it were Daytona. ‘She will end up bad,’ we said. At fifteen I could tell, by the empty beer cans on my front yard the next day, what kind of weekend she had wasted. ‘They’re just going to have to take her in hand,’ I said. ‘She’s headed for trouble.’

Then at sixteen, there was a story in the papers, the trial, and she was sent away for a year at the Youth Correctional Institution. ‘We told you so,’ we said. ‘Only a matter of time,’ we agreed. While there, she gave birth to the child she was carrying.

The day of reckoning came. I was cutting my hedge at the time. I could see them though. Cars began gathering about ten or eleven that morning. Loud music coming from the house. People came and went, bringing baskets of food, dishes, stacks of plates. Chairs were put out on the lawn. The music grew louder. Finally, a car pulled up. People came pouring out of the house and huddled around the car. Everybody oohing and aahing. I was hacking at the hedge, cutting it down to the roots by this time. Some kind of little basket, decorated with pink ribbons, was unloaded. Everyone paraded behind it into the house. I watched them from my now-sparse hedge. Before going in, my neighbour had the nerve to stand on the porch and yell, ‘Hey, she’s home, and the baby too. Come on over and join us. We’re having a party!’

Who? Me? Humph! I’m a Christian!”

Is Willimon right? Is there a possibility that we ever judge others saying that there is no way that **they** could ever repent and really mean it! And even if **they** did repent, it wouldn't be enough because God would never forgive **them**! Us, yes! **Them**, no! Indeed, perhaps rather unfairly, what is the popular

stereotype of a Christian? A person who is kind, loving and compassionate? Or a person who is harsh and judgemental?

The tremendous though possibly disturbing news of today's lesson is that God is the greatest prodigal of all; lavish and extravagant with his love and forgiveness. Sometimes we may act like squandering fools with all the wrong values and priorities, making a mess of it all. And sometimes we may be harsh and judgmental, full of an unholy, unlovely self-righteousness. Even so, none of us are beyond the reach and scope of God's love and redemption. God is always patiently waiting for us to come to our senses and come home. Truly none of us are beyond the reach of God's love, mercy, and compassion. With this in mind, I would like to end this message by sharing a favourite verse of mine. It is humorous but it also has a point. It goes:

"I dreamed of death the other night,
And heaven's gates swung open wide.
An angel with a halo bright
Ushered me inside.
And there to my astonishment stood folks I had judged and labeled
As 'quite unfit', of 'little worth', and 'spiritually disabled'.
Indignant words rose to my lips, but never were set free,
For every face showed stunned surprise:
Not one expected me!"

Pastoral Prayer

Hear us we pray as we once again bow our heads in prayer before you.

We begin this prayer by offering you our thanks, for we truly do have so much that we can and should be grateful for. We thank you for the gift of this day, and that we are here as a part of your good creation. We thank you for the goodness of your creation as the days grow longer and warmer. We thank you for the bounty of your creation, supplying our wants and needs as it does. Help us we pray to treasure the world around us; grant us the wisdom to use its resources wisely and well.

We pray this day, not only for the sake of your creation but also for the sake of all who live therein. We pray for healing in the lives of those who are ill. We pray for peace, comfort, and strength in the lives of those who mourn. We pray for those struggling to get by, and for those too who are unsure of what to do and are feeling overwhelmed as the pandemic restrictions continue to be eased.

As we have so often in the past weeks, we once again pray for the people of Ukraine. We pray for all those caught up in the fighting, and for all who have fled and are now refugees. We pray as well for those who have lost contact with family members and friends and have been left wondering and fearing about what has happened to them. May the fighting stop and may peace be restored.

As the world's attention is focused on what is happening in Eastern Europe, we remember and pray as well for other places in the world where there is so much pain, heartache, and destruction, such as that experienced by the people in the American South after the tornadoes of the past week.

During these days of Lent, we remember your very nature and our relationship with you. With this in mind, we thank you that you are prodigal with your mercy, love, compassion, and forgiveness. We thank you that your love and compassion truly is over all that you have made, including each and every one of us. Help us then not to be harsh, judgemental, and uncaring. Help us to see others as you do. Help us we pray to love, even as we are loved.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen