

Which Son Are You?

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Last Sunday's scripture emphasized the urgent need to repent in response to Jesus' message. Today's scripture is part of a series of parables (15:1-32)—of which our story of the prodigal son is the conclusion—offering an insight into how the sinner's repentance is received by God. I have called this sermon “Which Son Are You?” In our scripture the Pharisees and scribes persisted in their grumbling as sinners and tax collectors continued to respond positively to Jesus' preaching (vv. 1-2). They seem to have forgotten that Jesus announced that his work was about the "lost and found." Jesus had announced "the acceptable year of the Lord," in Nazareth at the start of his ministry (4:18-19 RSV).

The prospect of releasing captives was indeed good news for those who saw their own story played out in the life of the prodigal son. Here was a young man whose very existence epitomized the depths of sin that most of us know so well, whether we choose to admit it or not. The younger son personifies what appears to be a universal human perception, that worse than death is the feeling of being lost, especially when this condition has been brought on by one's own lust, greed, or arrogance.

As Jesus tells it, a prosperous landowner has two sons. The younger could not wait until Daddy died before he got his inheritance. Despite the insult, the father gave the younger son his share of the family property. The youngest sold his portion and ran off to some first-century Las Vegas, squandered it all, and ended up eating beans and mush alongside the hogs he was reduced to feeding. In a short time the prodigal son managed to turn his back on his family, forsook the familiarity of his homeland, and lost sight of his religious heritage (as suggested by

his intimate knowledge of the swine pen). Devoid of those most basic relationships, he became in effect a nonperson. However his was not an experience utterly without hope, for he was still by grace able to utter the single word with which his entire misadventure began: "Father." Then he decided that he might return home—even if his father would not take him back as a son and treated him like a hired hand, it would be better than his current condition.

So home he went and braced himself for the humiliation he deserved. However as he came over the hill in sight of his hometown, his father ran to greet him with open arms. The prodigal could not even launch into the groveling speech about how he deserved nothing more than hired-hand status—the one he had rehearsed over many weeks and many miles—before the father was wrapping him in the household's finest robe and putting a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. It was the royal treatment, literally. Before he could blink the tears out of his eyes, a fatted calf had been killed and most of the town had been invited into a spectacular party. It was a shindig of biblical proportions.

Grace lies at the heart of this parable—scandalous grace, grace that defies all earthly rules and conventions. Identifying too closely with the younger son, we risk neglecting the central point of the story: the extraordinary love of the father, who runs to greet his child "while he was still far off." We get the sense here that the spurned parent was in fact keeping vigil, praying for the day his boy would return. Like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep or a woman rummaging for her misplaced coin, the father remained hopeful that the seeds he had once sown in love might be harvested in the return of his child.

The economy of such love and grace surprises, even offends, us in its extravagance. While the ways of the world suggest that yes, the son might be welcomed home, but reasonably so—on a ration of bread and water in answer to his deplorable sin—the economy of God is such that rejoicing for the return of a

child is simply not enough. Joy must be made all the more complete by abundance: the best robe, the finest ring, the fatted calf. This is the amazing thing about grace, that while we remain bound in both body and soul to Adam's sin, the Spirit of God enables us to utter the word of salvation—"Father"—and God runs out to meet us in the person of his Son. As we once perceived that being lost was a fate worse than death, we can now proclaim in faith that greater than life itself is living with the knowledge that we have been found. The response of God to all of this is unbridled rejoicing.

For us the story would be perfectly satisfying if it ended right there. You or I or he or she comes back to God, and God celebrates a return for each of us. Not too shabby. However Jesus did not stop the story here. At this juncture he brought the elder son back into the picture, the apparently faithful child who remained at home and "slaved" for his father while his younger brother squandered his inheritance on libidinous excess—and big brother is miffed. He had not insulted his father. He had not shot his inheritance on prostitutes and good times. He had just slaved away, day after day, year after year, and his father had never even tossed a goat-party for him and a few of his buddies. He was mad. He would not set foot in that big, raucous, rich bash—you could hear the music and the festive noise from out in the north forty!—going on around his ingrate brother.

Before we shake our heads at the older brother, it is perhaps better for us to attend to the way we so easily resonate with the older son's point of view. When we think of the older son's reaction, it is instructive for those of us who have long been part of the church—who have "been with the father always"—to recognize various aspects of our own sinfulness. He had been responsible, he had behaved well, and he had prudently kept his inheritance secure. Little brother, meanwhile, had sinned profligately and enjoyed it, and for his "punishment," he was got the party of the year. Did big brother not have a right to at least a little resentment?

Pride, jealousy, anger, and self-righteousness are all appalling when we know that, as beneficiaries of God's grace through our baptism, we should be engaged in the rejoicing that accompanies the return of a prodigal. Yet sin mars and hinders our ability to rejoice at the acceptance of others. We assume the worst in others. Like the elder son embellishing his brother's story with "prostitutes," our jealousy often compels us to exaggerate the shortcomings of those in our midst. We think first of how certain turns of events might affect us, instead of how they might benefit the well-being of the body of Christ. We cling to our tried and true ways of doing things, wishing that someone would simply acknowledge our faithfulness, if not with a "fatted calf," then at least with a "young goat." Too often we claim as our own the standards of the world, in which justice is lauded over mercy instead of the other way around.

In the story as Jesus tells it, the father did not berate and get all critical with the elder brother. Nor did he defend the younger brother. Instead, he shifted attention away from both of the brothers. The father turned attention to his own love and bounty. There was plenty to go around, he said in so many words. No one will run short—"all that is mine is yours" (15:31). This is not your younger brother's party so much as it is *my* party, the party I throw for many. I am on the lookout for all my loved ones, near or far. I am working for them and ready to celebrate with them before they even think of responding to me or giving anything back.

Behind Jesus' parable lies profound and overwhelming truth about God and God's kingdom. We humans, we all were lost, mired in sins of sensuality and greed and self-referential resentment, hip-deep in the pig slop of envy. Before we knew it, God reached out in the people Israel and then in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. God raised us up and called us home. It is just not about you or me, or my sin or your sin, or my deserts or your deserts. It is about God and God's life-giving love and mercy. Every time God's active, stretching, searching,

healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is less for the rest of us. It means there is more. More wine. More feasting. More music. More dancing. It means more rejoicing, and now a bigger party.

It matters not whether we see ourselves in the actions and attitude of the younger or older brother; the parable of the Prodigal Son offers a view from the kingdom that is often not acknowledged, much less seen clearly. Here, in contrast to "the way things should be," mercy wins over justice, abundance trumps anger, and wayward children are welcomed home by loving parents. This is the overwhelming scandal of grace, which is cause for great rejoicing. **Daniel G. Deffenbaugh and Rodney Clapp**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.