

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
4 Lent – March 27, 2022
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 – The Prodigal Son/The Loving Father
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We have just heard one of Jesus' most familiar parables, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We consider this parable in Lent because this is the season of the church year when we are especially called to repentance. The story of the younger son – the Prodigal Son – and his father's forgiveness is a story that may help us turn back to God with the hope of God's forgiveness.

We might take a fresh look at this parable if we re-name it the Parable of the Loving Father. The main character of the entire story is the father who loves both of his sons. Both sons had "gone wrong" – in different ways – and their father loved them both. The father's love is a cause for celebration, the "good" in the "good news" that Jesus came to share.

As is so often the case when we consider the teachings of Jesus, the context is important. Some of the religious leaders had been grumbling because Jesus had been eating with tax collectors and sinners, socializing with moral outcasts. As Jesus had said to the chief tax collector named Zacchaeus, "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). The religious leaders who were grumbling may have regarded themselves as "never lost" in terms of their religious and moral lives. So, Jesus tells them this parable.

The father's younger son had clearly done wrong. He had made the outrageous request of asking his father for his inheritance before his father's death. He then went away and wasted his inheritance "in dissolute living." We can imagine how. When his money ran out and there was a severe famine, he had to go to work feeding pigs. He was so hungry he wished he could eat the pigs' food. He'd "hit bottom." Desperate, he turns back to his father.

His loving father must have been eagerly watching for his son's return. How else would he have seen the young man "while he was still far off"? When he sees his son, he is "filled with compassion." The young man must have looked terrible after all he'd done and suffered. It may have been obvious to his father that he returned because his belly was empty. As a priest I knew put it, the son didn't have a change of heart so much as a change of diet. But that didn't matter. The father loved his son so much that all that mattered was that he had returned, from death to life. "He was lost and is found!" So, there was a celebratory feast with music and dancing. What an astounding portrayal of God's lavish mercy and love for the repentant sinner!

Had Jesus been teaching those "sinners" he welcomed and ate with, the parable might have ended there. But he was teaching the religious and moral leaders, not "the lost" but "the never lost." So he goes on to describe the response of the father's elder son to his brother's return. This son was angry because his father was merciful to his brother. The Pharisees and scribes were "grumbling" because Jesus welcomed and ate with sinners, and for them, Jesus' parable would have "hit home" here, in the reaction of the elder son.

The elder son was angry and refused to join the festivities in honor of his brother's return. "His father came out and began to plead with him." His father was being loving and merciful to him, inviting him to come in, giving him a chance to vent his feelings. All the son's resentment comes out in two complaints: "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command." This son hadn't enjoyed a relationship of mutual love with his father. He had been obedient and diligent, like a good slave, not like a

loving son. Somehow, he had not understood his father to be the kind of man who would say, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

I think most people can identify with the younger son. The fact that this parable has been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son shows how people's focus has generally been on that portion of the parable. Most of us can remember how we have gone wrong in the past, how we may be going wrong now. What do you think of when you sing "Amazing Grace" and come to the words, "I once was lost and now am found"? We, too, want to be forgiven and to be welcomed home by God.

As religious people, church people, it is important for us to take a good look at the elder brother and learn what Jesus is saying to the religious leaders of his day and to us. The elder son complained that he had worked like a slave for his father for years and had never been given a party. Isn't it a temptation for us to think that way about the work we do for the church? How often do we "do good" out of a sense of obligation instead of from love and gratitude to our loving God? Have we missed the wonderful fact that God has filled us with blessings, that God is always with us? Do we think that God "owes" us some special recognition and favor because we serve God?

People who do their best to live according to God's ways have another temptation that is expressed by the elder brother when he says, "I have never disobeyed your command." Like the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled about Jesus socializing with moral outcasts, we may be tempted to become self-righteousness and judgmental. That story of the younger son really applies to other people more than to us, doesn't it?

In the early centuries of Christianity many men and women chose to leave the world and live in the desert of Egypt to seek God. Some of them lived alone, some formed monastic communities. They are known as the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers. Some of these men and women were sought out for their teaching and spiritual wisdom and their words were recorded. One famous monk was known as Abba Moses. This story about him has been passed down. A monk in one of the communities near Alexandria had committed a fault. "A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, 'Come, for everyone is waiting for you.' So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, 'What is this, Father?' The old man said to them, 'My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another.' When they heard that, they said no more to the brother but forgave him." (from "To Love as God Loves," by Roberta Bondi, page 13).

The Parable of the Loving Father is a lesson about God's extravagant and limitless love for all of God's children. God is our loving heavenly Father. If we've gone wrong like the younger son, God wants us to leave the pigs and come home to the party. If we've gone wrong like the elder son, God wants us to receive his love, love his love, sing and dance because God is so steadfastly loving and gracious and merciful. We are called to grow in love, into the likeness of God in whose image we have been created. Jesus helps us understand what that means. We are called to receive God's love and mercy, to be so filled with love that we come to see things as God sees things, so that someday it will be impossible for us to do anything but join the party and rejoice, impossible for us not to be happy with the entire guest list. May we thank our loving Father for his mercy to all, with all our hearts! In Jesus' name. Amen.