

4 Lent: 3/18/2007  
St. Francis Episcopal Church  
Holden, MA  
The Rev. Darrell Huddleston

Josh. 5:9-12  
Ps. 32  
2 Cor. 5:16-21  
Lk. 15:1-3, 11b-32

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When it comes to this particular parable of Jesus it suffers from over familiarity on our part. Preachers attempt to find some new slant that will keep congregations from snoozing through the sermon. And, I will share one of those slants in just a minute, one I came across this week. It's a new one to me and I'll be interested to hear if it's new to any of you.

We call this the parable of the Prodigal son, yet the word prodigal never appears in the text. However, it's a pretty good word to describe the younger son for it means "spendthrift, extravagant, wasteful, and squandering." Jesus begins his parable with the sentence, "*There was a man who had two sons.*" He did not intend for us to focus just on the younger son, or for that matter just on the older son. The sons are crucial because we are so like them, but the Father is the true center of this parable. The Father represents the unmerited and accepting love of God.

The interesting slant I read this week was from The Rev. Dr. Janice Hearn and she tells the story from the viewpoint of the fatted calf. (1) Without the fatted calf there could be no party. The fatted calf is the Christ figure in this parable...a metaphor for the Lamb of God...who gives its life for the party that makes grace and forgiveness possible...for both sons. The fatted calf, then, is part and parcel of the father's forgiving love, a love that reaches out to us.

So, with that background, let's now look at the two brothers, beginning with the younger one. I doubt that he was a particularly bad person. He was an adventurer, a seeker, looking for the meaning of life, and like a lot of us, life looked greener on the other side of the fence. He demanded his inheritance and his father gave it to him...an unheard of thing to do since you normally waited till death to get your inheritance. The father could have ordered him to stay with him, but he probably realized that his son might have been there physically but his spirit would have been elsewhere. Plus, a deep-seated resentment would have probably built up in the younger son toward his father.

The younger son was self-centered but I imagine his father knew that sometimes the only way we learn is the hard way. The younger son set out on his journey full of confidence. It didn't take long before the money was gone, famine was in the land, and his confidence ran out. He was all alone and destitute. It doesn't say so, but it is highly likely that any new so-called friends he made were probably the type of person as himself. He ends up feeding pigs, a great degradation for a Jew.

But, it was in that hog pen that he finally faced the truth about himself. "*I have sinned against heaven and against my father.*" Sin not only offends God it also breaks down relationships. In his case it brought shame, degradation and loneliness to himself, grief

and worry to his father, and bitterness to his brother. It threw their whole household into chaos.

There are many types of pig pens in this life and we can all find ourselves in one from time to time. For some poor souls their entire lives seem to be nothing but one large hog wallow. As anyone with an addiction can tell you, it is sometimes necessary to hit bottom before you can start moving out of the pig pen. The younger son faced up to the truth and confessed what he had done to God and his father. That's the first step on the road back home.

Our Old Testament lesson tells us that when the manna ran out for the people of Israel, God provided another resource. That younger son was never alone, just as Israel was never alone in the dessert, for God was with him in that pig pen...he simply wasn't aware of it until he was lying in the muck. The promise is that God can lead us out of any pig pen and down that healing road to home.

It's tempting to say the father was too easy on the younger son, that he didn't practice enough tough love. The point of the parable is that God welcomes the sinner. The process of reconciliation was by no means easy for that younger son. He would bear the scars of his life in that far country. One does not go to the edge of physical, spiritual and emotional death without a few permanent scars. But, in that far country was the beginning of him becoming a "*new creation*" as St. Paul puts it in the epistle. "*...everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*" That's why his father exclaimed: "*He was dead...now he is alive! He was lost...now he is found.*"

The elder brother is a very unpopular figure in this parable. He takes it on the chin from many of us and most of us do not like to identify with him. However, he is not unpopular or unusual in real life. His descendants are many. We can all trace our family tree back to him much easier than we can to the younger son. The younger son represents a minority of us; the elder son represents the majority of us. He was hardworking and loyal, traits we all admire. Unfortunately, he had a few other traits not so admirable. He was self-righteous and jealous, filled with anger and self-pity.

The father, however, welcomed back the sinner from afar and he welcomed back the one who had gotten lost at home. "*Son,*" he said to elder boy, "*you are always with me and all that I have is yours.*" We do not know the response of the elder brother. But he is all of us, he is everywhere. He keeps the letter of the law, but breaks the spirit. He can't rejoice over the happiness of others who are lost and now are found. He can't forgive that his irresponsible brother gets a party for just coming back home, while he worked and slaved and doesn't get one.

You can hear him: "Dad, he got just what he deserved. Give him a good thrashing and send him out to the south forty and make him work for once in his life. Why fuss over him...he's no good. But look at me. I stayed with you and built up the family fields and fortune." It is by the older brother's attitude that we prosper, but when the elder brother

syndrome gets hold of us we become more concerned with prospering and getting our fair share than with sharing in God's love in finding the lost, thus ending up lost ourselves.

It's a lot harder for elder brother types to be converted than the younger son types. They don't know that they too stand in need of redemption. They're dead and don't know it. "I'm just fine the way I am...it's you all that messed up...it's you that doesn't understand." Every person stands in the need of God's grace, acceptance and love, whether we are lost far from home or in our own backyard. God's love is just like the father in this parable. It is excessive, persistent, and seemingly irrational. It is a love that risks everything.

That's the kind of God we worship, the kind of God whose incredible sacrificial love was made known to us in Jesus Christ, symbolized by that fatted calf, if you will. Because of such love always in our midst, we, like the love of that father for his two sons, who would not choose between them but chose both of them, can not only receive it into our hearts, but offer it to others as well. Because of such love we can not only be lifted from the pig pens of our lives, but from being lost in our own comfortable and secure backyards.

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(1) Theological Web Publishing, March, 2007. The Rev. Dr. Hearns states that she got the idea from Robert Farrar Capon's book, The Parables of Grace, published by Erdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.