

Sermon Lent 4C. March 31, 2019

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.'"

This parable wrenches my emotions every which way. My highest hopes, my deepest fears, glimmers of my best qualities, and my most terrible faults. I am by turns each of the two sons, and at my best a pale, feeble imitation of the loving father. I see myself in this story. I suspect I am not alone in this.

Younger Son

At one time or another, we have all been something like the younger son. We wanted to get away from family and any restrictions that were placed upon us, and in some reckless way, tried out some of the things that were forbidden, foolhardy, dangerous.

And we have all, at one time or another, found ourselves, through our own folly, without resources—material, or emotional, or in some other way—and friendless, longing for the love and security we thought we had renounced. And some of us at least have turned and headed home, ready to humble ourselves, acknowledging our mistakes, hoping against hope for mercy and welcome, beyond our deserving. We all have something of the younger son in us, in our hopes and choices and mistakes in life. We want to be loved and come home, wherever or whoever or whatever that might be.

Father

Most of us, probably, have longed for the return for a child or a friend or a someone who became estranged from us. We hope for return, for reconciliation, to be once more in the presence of that loved one. In our heart of hearts we imagine acting as the father in our story, leaping out the doorway and running to that person, embracing them, not even listening to explanations, so great is our joy.

In our heart of hearts we imagine ourselves that way, but when a possible reconciling moment comes, can we act, do we act, with that limitless love? Often, too often, we spoil the opportunity by demanding explanation, or acknowledgement of how they hurt us, or apology, or reparation. What happens to reconciliation then? We so often fall short of our own desires when it comes to the quality of our love.

Older Son

For me, and perhaps for many more of us, the older son's resentment and anger at his father's welcome of the wasteful, selfish, unworthy brother strikes particularly close to home. The father's welcome of the sinner and the lack of his appreciation for the diligent, faithful, long-suffering stay-at-home reminds us of our own anger at being unappreciated, taken for granted.

We work hard, and do our best, and accomplish much. So, we want to be celebrated. We want to be noticed and appreciated and even catered to for our own virtues. Moreover, when instead somebody else gets the recognition and glory and affection, we resent that. Our focus goes straight to that person's flaws, and we grumble—why does that one get praised and pampered and I don't? We don't want to see good things lavished on someone we consider unworthy, or at least less worthy than ourselves. It's unfair, we say.

So often, we demand "justice" (that is, punishment) for people we consider sinners or unworthy, yet we expect mercy and forgiveness for ourselves whenever we mess up.

When he takes offense at his brother's effusive welcome by his father, the older son is just as lost to his father's love as his brother had been. It's a self-imposed exile, all to hold a grudge. Can we see how that sort of thinking destroys relationships?

When we look for other people's so-called flaws, real or imagined, we not only wall ourselves off from those people, but we also wall ourselves off from any joy or benefit or interest they might bring to us. And we wall ourselves off from everyone who loves them—including our loving God, who loves us all.

A common example of this kind of thinking? I think this kind of resentment is behind people's rejection of what is called "political correctness". Political correctness, as I understand it, is the act of modifying how we speak or act to allow for the fact that there are other people present to whom our speech or action might give offense. We used call this "being considerate of other people", that is, speaking in such a way as to minimize the chance that our speech would make someone feel excluded or inferior. Being considerate is an act of love. Mocking the act of being considerate is taking a step away from loving our neighbor.

The way I see it, a lot of the resistance to "political correctness" comes from the fact that this practice acknowledges groups who were previously expected to be silent and invisible. When they are, instead, given voices, respect, and visibility, it makes previously privileged people/groups feel that they have lost something. They feel disrespected, impatient, resentful.

Another example of the anger coming from including the formerly excluded comes from Central American migrants flowing over our southern border. When newly arrived migrant parents sought asylum, and then were forcibly separated from their children, I read press reports of people saying things like, “They broke the law, why should we welcome them? They deserve any treatment they get, even separation from their kids.”

What would the father in our story say to that? Wouldn't he be running to open the door to these people? The father wouldn't care about their “law-breaking” (though it is not against the law to seek asylum), but instead would bring them in, feed and clothe them and celebrate their escape from peril. Unrealistic? Maybe, but are we Christians called to be realistic?

It is very common to react to another's misfortune by pointing out how they brought it on themselves. There are many who blame women for being raped. Some blame the poor and homeless for their “bad choices”. Some blame homosexuals for “choosing a lifestyle” and being rejected or beaten up. Some blame African Americans for the relentless racism that they face in every situation, every day. We've all heard this kind of talk. No wonder our culture is increasingly fragmented, so many of us are blaming other people instead of working together.

We don't have to be lost, just as the older son doesn't. We all have the choice to head back in to the banquet and rejoice at the ones who were lost but now are found, without enumerating the mistakes they made. Isn't that what we would like for ourselves?

The loving father of our story loves with a love far beyond an ordinary human's. He doesn't wait for his children to cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes and become saints. No; he just waits for a glimpse of a face turned homeward.

Yes, love like this, that is manifestly unfair in forgiving all things, without needing an apology or perfection or even evidence of reform, is the love of God, the love of Jesus we Christians aim to embrace and imitate.

That perfect love is beyond us as ordinary humans. But we aren't alone; within us lives God in the power of the Holy Spirit. God enables us, if we consent to try, to love our neighbors better. What *can* we do? Maybe give a loving, compassionate welcome those seeking asylum, whether or not

they got here legally. Decide to believe gay people when they say they were born gay, decide to reach out to African-Americans and people of a different skin color than yours, and love them, try to undo a little of the injustice they suffer.

As to political correctness, maybe we can look deeply into our hearts and see whether it is in us to speak more carefully so as not to make a non-Christian or an immigrant or an older person or a younger person or anyone unlike us feel unwelcome or inferior.

We can resolve to love more like our loving God the Father, our loving God the Son, our loving God the Holy Spirit, who is waiting at the threshold, hoping for a glimpse of us. We can turn to God, and who will run with open arms to welcome us in, whether or not we deserve any such thing. We can resolve this day to love our neighbors better, more as God does. With God's help we *can do* that. Amen.