



“Think You Are Not in This Parable?”
Scripture – Luke 15:1-3, 11b – 32
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 31, 2019

Jesus was a master of parables, and today we ponder one of his best known. Some of you could tell the story by heart. Routinely the spotlight shines on the younger, immature brother who needed to pull himself up out of the muck and scamper back to God, but it is equally a tale of an older, conscientious brother who failed to grasp how he too had created a void between himself and God.

A parable is a brilliant method of teaching because while it purports to be a story about others, it is intended to lure into the narrative anyone who hears it. Parables prompt us to reflect on the ways we are similar or dissimilar to certain figures in the story. Well-crafted parables remind us of our character and our values, and they reveal something of the character and values of God.

While each of us can uncover a gem in this story, it helps to remember the original target audience. It was not simply a general crowd of folks who had gathered, but rather two specific groups of people who were at opposite ends of the behavior spectrum. One group was comprised of tax collectors and sinners; the other group was made up of Pharisees.

Now, the Pharisees have been vilified in so many sermons over the centuries that the mere mention of their name prompts odious thoughts. I’ll not attempt to thoroughly revamp their image, but if you think the word “villain” is synonymous for “Pharisee” you have overshot the mark. Pharisees held the Scriptures in the highest esteem and were the most devout followers of God’s law. If you needed someone who was brave, clean, and reverent, and you did not have a boy scout handy, you would call on a Pharisee. If you wanted someone to testify on your behalf, you would call on a Pharisee. Need someone to make a charitable contribution? Call on a Pharisee. Someone has pointed out that if you had a teetering church and needed to strengthen the faithful commitment within the congregation, you would do well to recruit a few Pharisees. They were law-abiding citizens with the highest moral standards.

So how did they garner a shady reputation? By being not only righteous, but self-righteous. Have you ever been around someone who is so full of himself that you start looking for an escape route? That was typical of Pharisees. They sneered at people who were not as devout as they were. They were quick to judge the failings of others and highlight their personal virtues. A Pharisee was a perfect example of what Mark Twain had in mind when he referred to someone as “a good person in the worst sense of the word.”

One of the reasons the Pharisees were at odds with Jesus was because they were appalled by the company he kept. They were astounded that he would eat and drink with prostitutes and tax collectors. They would never do such

a thing because they feared it would tarnish their reputations. The problem with Pharisees was that they were reverent, but joyless. They were conscientious, but sanctimonious. They were hard-working, but arrogant. They were devout, but unforgiving. And while they knew the law better than anyone, they could be so hypocritical. If Jesus had only the sinners and tax collectors in mind when he uttered his parable, there would have been no older brother in the story. Those needing a moral upgrade would identify with the younger brother, but Jesus' primary objective was to snare the Pharisees.

The story is a classic. A man has two sons. The younger of the two approached his father and said bluntly, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." The son's request was tantamount to saying, "Father, I cannot wait for you to die."

Most fathers would either explode in rage, or dissolve in tears at his son's cruel words. But not this father. He simply grants the request. He knew that giving advice was useless, because this son only learned one way – the hard way. So, the father gave him his inheritance.

Within a short time, the younger son gathered all he had and took off for a distant land. Living for nothing but the moment, he burned through his cash. And just as he wasted his last shekel and the good times ground to a halt, a famine loomed over the land. With food and jobs scarce, he latched onto the only job he could find: feeding pigs. Even that did not make enough to keep himself fed, so he had to eat the slop he was dishing out to the pigs.

Pig slop is a great motivator. It quickly drove him to his senses so he decided to take one final roll of the dice. He would return home, face his father's justified wrath, and hope that after a well-deserved punishment, his father would take pity on him and give him a position as a servant.

He began his trek home, and as he drew closer to home, he had a dramatic uptick in his heartbeat, his palms began to sweat, and his mind began to race. How would his father receive him after he had told him he wished he were dead and made him look like the wimpiest father in the community?

Would his father get physical with him? Or would his father avoid all eye contact and act as if he did not even exist? Would the father order his family and hired hands not to speak to him? The son had acted as if his father were dead; maybe the father would give him a taste of his own medicine.

But it turns out that he did not really know his father. His father was not seething with anger over being humiliated; he was worrying himself sick. Like parents who begin to imagine the worst when their child is long overdue, the father feared he would never see his son again. A day never passed when he failed to peer down the road in hopes of spotting his lost boy.

Then, one day, he cannot believe his eyes. In the distance, he sees a figure that resembles his son. Bursting with hope, the father hikes up his robe and dashes down the road. As the son spots his father rushing toward him, he says to himself, "This is it. I must make my words count." But before he can utter a single word of confession, his father pounces on him like an end zone celebration. The stunned young man blurts out his line about becoming a servant, but his dad ignores it. He's too busy shouting: "Someone grab the best robe in the house! Put a ring on his finger and bring new sandals! Start preparing a feast because we are going to have a glorious celebration!" Through tears of joy he says to everyone within earshot, "I thought my son was dead, but he's alive."

Meanwhile, word of what was happening shot back to the older brother as swift as a text message: *Younger brother has returned. Father is ecstatic. Plans to throw a grand party.*

The older brother's reaction is immediate. His eyes squint, his teeth clench, and his emotions flare. "Surely Dad first lectured him. Surely Dad extracted a promise that he would never pull such a brainless stunt ever again. Surely Dad informed him that he would have to work off every last shekel he wasted!"

As the older brother stomps in from the fields and nears the house, he hears music and dancing. When he reaches the front yard, he stands like a statue and refuses to go inside. His father comes out and pleads with him to join the celebration, but the older brother is indignant. He cocks his head and says to his father, "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, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. We have to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead, but he has come back to life; he was lost, but now he has been found."

I would love the opportunity to pepper both of these sons with questions. Here are a few I would like to ask the younger brother: Was your confession genuine? Are you truly sorry for blowing part of the family fortune and causing your father such pain? Or, are you just a slick talker who would say whatever it took to get a roof back over your head? After the party was over, did you start acting like a grown-up by taking responsibility for your actions, or did you continue to act as if the world owed you? Did you ever apologize to your older brother and admit what a fool you had been, or did you remain oblivious to the ripples of pain you set in motion?

While I personally identify more with the older brother, I still have some questions I'd like to ask him: Did you ever master your feelings of resentment? Were you ever able to enjoy someone else's success? If you ever have children, will you be able to forgive the one who tests your patience beyond reason? Will you be generous with second chances, or will you say, "When I was your age nothing was easy; I earned everything I got!"

And most importantly: Did you ever learn how to fall into your father's arms and say, "Thank you?"

Although they came from the same seed and womb, grew up under the same roof, and were taught the same faith, they possessed such distinct spirits. The elder sought security, the younger sought independence. The elder trusted wisdom, the younger needed to learn for himself. The elder saved, the younger spent. The elder sought to please, the younger sought to challenge. The elder thought in terms of consequences, the younger craved experiences.

While each of us is more like one brother than the other, if we take a close look, we will find elements of each brother within us. And if we dig deeply enough, we will discover ways that we widen the gap between ourselves and God.

May each of us have the courage to name the ways we distance ourselves from the One who was and is and ever shall be. And may we muster the resolve to overcome these thoughts and actions so that we may return home and join the celebration.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Mercy –

Like a mother, who watches at the window for her daughter's return,
like a father, who wraps his son in an embrace tender and warm,
you welcome us with outstretched arms and enfold us with your grace.

This grace is generous.

It is abundant.

It is prodigal.

And it transforms us.

For we do not deserve this grace; we can do *nothing* to deserve this grace. All we can do is respond. So help us, we pray. Help us to receive the grace you lavish upon us and, then, to turn around and share it with others.

Help us show the Father's hospitality to those who come into our lives, even if only for a moment. Whether friends at the kitchen table, colleagues at the office, classmates on the playground, or strangers on a street corner – open our hearts to receive others with compassion and kindness.

Help us offer the Father's forgiveness to those who have caused us pain. Not out of obligation or expectation, not in a way that excuses the damage done ... but as an outpouring of grace that flows toward wholeness. Heal our hearts, so that we might be instruments of healing in our homes, our neighborhoods, and our world.

Help us extend the Father's extravagance to those within – and beyond – our communities. Not, perhaps, by bringing out the finest robe or preparing a bountiful feast, but by giving of our time and talents in gratitude for the blessings of our lives. Stretch our hearts to new expressions of generosity that enrich the lives of others.

Help us lavish the Father's love upon this hurting world. Keep us ever watchful, so we might be ready to break into a run if we see a sister in need of compassion, or to wrap our arms around a brother who is suffering. Expand our hearts until they are large enough to welcome older brothers and wayward sons alike, and to point all your children to the feast of your grace.

Help us, O God, to be prodigal sons and daughters –
not in wasteful self-indulgence,
but in hospitality, forgiveness, generosity, and love.
Help us, O God, live lives of prodigal grace.

We lift this prayer in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — One God, Mother of us all. Hear us now as we offer the words Christ taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.