

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday March 27, 2022 Lent 4C
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Luke 15 1-3, 11b-32 The Prodigal Father
Themes: Prodigal Moments / Radical Welcome / The Prodigal Father

I had come home from college to celebrate my parent's 25th wedding anniversary, it was to be a big party with all kinds of guest and friends from different eras of their life together. They had uncharacteristically rented out an entire Thai restaurant on a Saturday Night and I was amazed. I was thrilled for interesting food and a crowd of people to celebrate. But my paternal grandmother was throwing fit, for a reason I never quite understood. She was her quintessential passive aggressive-self and my grandfather was trying to be the peacemaker to no avail. She and my grandfather had travelled for two days from Yerington, Nevada (somewhere in the middle of sand, sagebrush and rattlesnakes) to attend this party and now she was boycotting. I will never really forget the scene of her going out into our garage and sitting in their parked car and refusing to attend the anniversary celebration. I'll never know why she did it, was it her *coup de gras* that after 25 years she meant to prove to my mother that her son had always deserved better, something she had actually said aloud to my mother prior to their wedding? We left her there, pouting in the garage and went to the party and had a great time. My grandfather, the co-dependent and seemingly spineless preacher, stayed with her, missed the party, and offended my parents almost beyond repair. The next time I read the parable of the prodigal son, it hit me that I had been part of an older son prodigal moment. The irony of the smug self-righteousness of my two grandparents who fancied themselves Foursquare Gospel preachers has never ceased to amuse and horrify me at the same time. For what crazy reason would you boycott the 25th wedding anniversary of your son and his wife after driving for two days to attend it. The only answer I was ever given was that the dinner had been schedule too late in the evening.

Jesus has been taking criticism for his policy of radical welcome. The religious elites are grumbling, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Grumbling as one commentator explained "signifies a lack of understanding, a mindless objection, a thought that is agitating them deeply because it is confusing them greatly." (Shea) Simply put, his habit of sharing table fellowship with a questionable social group

had rankled the religious authorities. Jesus was messing with their neat categories of just who is “In” and who is “Out” just like he continues to mess with ours. If one thinks about it, Jesus never ate with “sinners” nor argued with “Pharisees and scribes.” Rather, I believe that Jesus shared meals with lost sons and daughters and engaged in conversations with other lost sons and daughters of God.

Who is welcome at our table? Who is welcome in our worship? Do we have a policy of radical welcome? It matters to welcome newcomers who take the risk to walk through our doors. I want to ask you to please do your best to greet people you don’t know. You don’t have to say “I don’t know you are you new?” that’s not very helpful. But you could easily say, “Hi, I’m Christopher and I don’t think we’ve met, I’m glad you’re here!” What if each of us spent as much time on Sunday morning welcoming newcomers or talking to people we don’t yet know instead of only talking to our friends. It matters when people walk through our doors if we pay attention to them, notice them and make a point of welcoming them instead of just talking to the people we already know. Being a radically welcoming church takes effort and it’s everyone’s job not just the designated greeters.

In response to his critics, Jesus decides to tell a parable, one of those pesky stories that tease the mind into active thought. The trouble with parables is that more than us reading them they seem to read us, and that can be unnerving at times. Welcome to the challenging ways of Jesus.

Jesus tells the story of two lost sons and one prodigal father. There is nothing quite like sibling rivalry and a poorly drawn up will to bring out the best in families. The youngest is so “thrilled” with the whole arrangement he delivers one of the most offensive speeches contained in all of our Holy Book. It goes something like this, “Dad, pardon the obvious disrespect, but I wish you were dead, so could I get what little inheritance I have coming to me right now, leave this miserable town, get away from my “perfect” brother, and find my own way in the wide world.” To almost everyone’s surprise the father actually does the unthinkable. He doesn’t get horribly offended, beat the son or banish him. He must have had a great therapist. The wealthy father divvies up his estate and gives his younger son his 1/3 early according to Jewish custom. The rest of the property then belongs to the eldest. This is clearly no typical patriarch. Inheritances are only received when the patriarch dies and not before. This odd behavior which continues throughout the story is a clue to the interpretation of the story. The father represents the self-giving spiritual reality of God. The whole story is wild, unorthodox and offensive.

With his future in hand the younger son skedaddles to Babylon, the French Quarter of New Orleans, Amsterdam's red-light district or Nineveh's south side, take your pick. The son abandons his day-to-day connection with his home and family. Let's just say he played the ponies, drank too much, embraced his inner-hedonism, ran with the wrong crowd and finally got robbed blind by a girl you wouldn't bring home to mama. About that time the economy went south and he found himself in need of work. It was humbling in the extreme for a Jewish boy, even a bad Jewish boy, to slop the pigs, but desperate times required desperate measures. With the bright lights and all the allures and the pleasures of city life but a faint memory, the younger son had plenty of time to think.

The story is one of complete degradation. The son sinks and sinks until he can virtually go no lower. He embodies a particular kind of desperation, of lostness before God. As one commentator said, "If people take the gift of God but do not stay in touch with the Giver, they begin a process of dehumanization." If we lose touch with the Source of Life, what little life we have begins to fade away. Wild living leads to emptiness. Fullness to famine. Symbolically the younger son becomes a slave in a far country instead of a son in the house of his father. Life is reduced to merely physical needs, hunger, exposure, isolation. But there is the seed of something more within the son, a longing for something he has lost. Empty stomachs can create insight.

Peering into the smelly mysteries of the slop bucket of his life he had an "Aha Moment." "What in the world am I doing here; when I can go home?" he said to himself and began to fashion a first-rate groveling speech for his father.

So, home he went, speech prepared, ready to become an employee on his father's estate. Here the story gets really good. As he approached home, we are told the most delicious detail. His father had not forgotten him, he had not written him off, quite to the contrary, his father had been awaiting his return, hoping it, praying it, anticipating it, scanning the horizon. In fact, there is in the text the mere hint that the father has had his people searching for his son, on the lookout for him, private investigators in the shadows watching, just in case.

The scene of the reunion touches each of us emotionally. I can hardly read the story without tearing up. The mystics often talk of glistening eyes, of tears as a sign that one is on the border between the sacred and the profane, between time and eternity. The Father doesn't sit in his study looking severely over his spectacles, his fingers drumming on the desktop, awaiting a grand apology and show of repentance. No, Jesus tells us that the father runs to the son. Losing all sense of

dignity, the father jumps out of his Jaguar and runs through the desert scrub and sand in his best Italian shoes and tailored suit to embrace his weary, filthy, skinny, desperate son. The camera shifts to slow-motion-soft-filter focus. The meeting is passionate, tears flowing, stammering apologies, sounds too deep for words, kisses. Surprisingly the boy finds himself swept off his feet by his father, his rehearsed groveling speech is cut-off, not allowed. He can hardly get a word in before his father swoops him up into the party. The compassion of the father is powerful, he runs, embraces, and kisses his lost son. It is a beautiful vision of overwhelming love and reconciliation. The son is not allowed to wallow in his sin, to let it define who he actually is, for he is far more. He is a beloved son. Celebration is the only appropriate response. If there is a moment of transformation in the younger son, it is probably here in the arms of his father. On our own we seldom comprehend our own sinfulness. Only in the light of God's love do we understand the darkness of our souls and our own deep need of God. As humans we do need to turn back to God, but we don't have to crawl nor grovel. Divine love meets us more than halfway. The Grace of God is proactive, seeking anyone who is willing to be found.

There follows a raucous party replete with the symbols of son-ship, power and restoration. The best robe is brought, a signet ring, and yes more of those Italian shoes. There is great rejoicing as the band sets up and the entire household celebrates the return of a son; one thought to be dead is alive, one lost to them has returned. Their worst fears have turned into laughter, the "I told you so" and "serves him right" have been transformed by the "radical welcome" of the father. Compassion reigns. To be prodigal is to be extravagant almost to the point of being wasteful, and it is the father who seems extravagant, not the son. He is the prodigal father, prodigal in his welcome, prodigal in his compassion, prodigal in his forgiveness, prodigal in his love.

However, clouds gather on the edge of all this sunshine as the older brother approaches the house. His irresponsible brother has returned to a grand welcome while he has been the hard-working-stay-close-to-home-I'm-always-dependable kind of guy. Predictably, he is angry and boycotts the party which is an insult to the father not unlike the younger son's insult of asking for his inheritance early. But the father who ran to one lost son, now comes out to another lost son. In a touching gesture the father tries to woo him into the party, but it is a troubled and troubling conversation. The elder son is so out of touch with his father's generosity. This hyper-responsible son is bitter, hardened, and suspicious; he rejects his father's compassionate ways. Even though he has stayed close to home, it is the elder brother that doesn't seem to know the father and his prodigal nature. He is still busy

trying to earn his father's affection and approval, oblivious that both are already available in abundance.

"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 comes back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

It is a complaint spoken in anger and it sadly reveals the heart of the eldest son. He has indeed stayed home and been dutiful, but he has done so as a slave and not as a son. He does not know his father and his father's generosity and therefore he lives a life of smoldering resentment that now comes to the surface. Working for external rewards rather than from an inner abundance eventually leads to an emotional state of resentment. Resentment is corrosive to the heart as it ruminates on perceived injustices and inequalities over and over again. It plays the comparison game that leads to death.

"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." The father's extravagant love, deep compassion, and generous heart has always been available, free for the taking, the enjoying, the living. For the father what matters is that they have always been together and that the father has held nothing back from the son. It is the same father who loves both of his lost boys, but the older boy does not truly know the father. What he knows is a fabricated father, a demanding father who withholds love from the one who deserves it and gives it to the one who doesn't deserve it. While the father has no favorites, the inner world of the older son blinds him to the true nature of his father. His own lack of joy makes him one that is lost, he has turned the gracious gift of his father into a burden for which there is never enough affirmation or compensation. He cannot celebrate because he has turned his relationship with the father into a drudgery and a demand.

The parable ends with unanswered questions. Will the eldest son join the party? Will the radical welcome, the prodigal love of the father overcome his eldest son's self-righteous resentments? We are left to wonder. Left to ponder our own prodigal moments. Left to find our way into and through this story.

In an eloquent sermon entitled, "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis pointed out that the problem isn't that our desires are too strong. Rather, our desires are too weak. We are far too easily pleased. We settle for mere trifles like money, sex, status, glory, when God wants to give us true wealth, genuine intimacy. We were not made for the far country, however enticing it may be. We are not made to stand outside

boycotting the party. We are sons and daughters, and we need not settle for less. We are made to rejoice in God's prodigal love.

I remember one time in a college bible study someone remarked that the church seemed more-full of older-brother-types, reward-driven people heaven-bent on doing everything right, refusing to embrace those sinful, inheritance-squandering-types, while Jesus seemed most at home with the younger-brother-kind-of-folks, those overwhelmed by their mistakes. It caught me off-guard at first having spent my whole life in the church. However, the more I've pondered the story of the Prodigal Father and his extravagant love, the more I came to realize that the father goes out to both of his sons. He makes the humbling trip to both of his lost children to deliver his message of wild forgiveness, of radical welcome in person. Jesus is clear about what he does. He seeks out the lost. In the end the distinction between the younger son and the older son breaks down, both are his children, both need his love, both need to be reconciled, both long for intimacy with the Father. Both need to experience the Father running toward them with arms wide open, with arms wide open, full of forgiveness. Both need to hear the music coming from the house and realize that they are home. Both need to rejoice at the revelation of God's wild grace. And so do each of us.