

Sermon, March 27, 2022

Luke 15:11-24
"The Prodigal Son"

In the beginning of this chapter there are people who have come to listen to Jesus teach, and they happen to be tax collectors and other forms of sinners. In other words, they are people generally shunned by their society. Jesus welcomed them and ate with them. The Pharisees and scribes were greatly annoyed by this. In their culture, to do so rendered someone 'unclean'. This didn't mean they were physically dirty, but that they were morally or spiritually impure according to the law of Torah.

Jesus, obviously, had different ideas about such hospitality, and responded to the scribes and Pharisees with parables. First, he tells them of a man who has a hundred sheep but loses one. And he asks which of them would not go off to find the lost one? Well, the man found the lost sheep, and invited his neighbors to come and rejoice with him over the lost sheep's return. Next, he tells of a woman who had ten silver coins but loses one. Frantically, she searches the house until the lost coin is found, and, again, she invites her neighbors to come and rejoice with her, having found that which was lost. Then Jesus says, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

As Jesus would later say, he did not come to save the innocent, but for those in need of redemption! And so, he reaches out to those in their society who are considered lost with compassion and mercy. He then tells them another parable - the one we call the parable of the Prodigal Son.

At the beginning of the story, we are specifically told that he is the younger of two sons. According to the law the firstborn son was to receive two thirds of the inheritance from the father, and the younger would receive one third. The younger son then decides to ask for his portion while the father is still alive. He then leaves home and uses his money on wine, women, and song. (The word 'prodigal' literally means someone who uses money extravagantly and recklessly). But his money is quickly run out, and desperate for food he is hired to feed pigs in the field. This was about as low as a man could sink in that culture, considering the fact that pigs were thought of as an unclean animal. Realizing that his father's servants are well fed, he goes home and asks to be hired as a servant. He must have felt totally humiliated to do so, but also quite surprised by his father's response to his return - running out, hugging and kissing him, placing a robe and ring on him, an order the killing of a fatted calf for a feast.

Again, this is a story about repentance, but more than that, it is about God's response to that repentance. It is told that when Abraham Lincoln was asked at the end of the Civil War how the southerners should be treated. He replied, "I will treat them as if they had never been away". So, this is the way the father treats his younger son, and it is how God responds to those who repent of sin.

Clearly, when read metaphorically, we are the prodigal son - not that we have necessarily lived extravagantly and recklessly, but that we have all, in some way, at some time, drifted away from God and done things we are not particularly proud of. We can then see the son's plan to return home and say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer fit to be called your son. Make me one of your hired servants." The father represents God, whose response is the same as Lincoln's.

An interesting part of the story is that the father sees the son at a distance and runs to him. This suggests that God does not sit patiently waiting for us to come to him. But actively seeks us out, ready to embrace us with mercy and forgiveness.

There is also a different aspect to this. Just as God is ready and willing to forgive, so are we called to do so. Each week we say in the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. (Debtors not necessarily meaning those who owe us money, but those who may have harmed, abused, or disappointed us in some way.). This part of the prayer reminds us that forgiveness is a large and important part of our Christian faith.

My paternal grandmother, in her later years, took elderly welfare patients into her home, giving them room, board and care. One day, one of the tenants, a woman a bit mentally unbalanced, rushed into the bathroom while my grandmother was taking a shower, reached in and turned the water up to scalding hot, burning my grandmother enough that she had to be hospitalized. Naturally, our family was outraged, but my grandmother was the first to forgive the woman. This was a shining example of Christian love that I have never forgotten.

As we are called to forgive others just as God has forgiven us, it's also important that we find the ability to forgive ourselves. Misdeeds from our past can haunt us with lingering feelings of guilt and shame. This can be very debilitating to our own mental and spiritual wellbeing. Learn to let it go, leave the past to the past, and embrace your forgiven self!

Being forgiven by God, forgiving others, and forgiving ourselves, leads to a greater sense of spiritual freedom - an avenue to New Life! Amen.

Let us pray: Holy God, we thank you for this Lenten season. It is a much-needed time for us to concentrate more fully on strengthening our relationship with you. We confess the lack of zeal with which we often approach this relationship. We confess the times when our love of the activities of this world overrides our love of spending time with you. We confess the ways we shut you out of our lives. Help us to resolve anew to grow in our desire to be close to you, for the sake of Christ's work on earth. Amen.