

Lent 4C

March 14, 2010

St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's
Commissioning of the Vestry

Joshua 5.9-12

Ps 32

2 Corinthians 5.16-21

Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

Most every Tuesday, some of the pastors in town get together to talk about the upcoming lessons for Sunday. It gives us all a chance to start talking and thinking and sharing as we look at what we'll be reading that week. It is good time that we all look forward to. As I began reading for this week's gospel from Luke about the prodigal son, I was surprised by many written commentaries which spoke of it as being the most beloved parable of all the parables. I thought, hmm, that's interesting because my experience with this parable has been that folks often have a tough time with it, mentioning its apparent unfairness and how they can relate to the older son and his anger. One of the other pastors said she had never heard that kind of comment, that she loved it and everyone she knew loved it. Well, I might love it, but I don't like it very much. We want God's favor for us, of course. But we may want it JUST for us, the ones who are working hard down on the farm.

So I decided to tell you a story about parables. This [For those of you reading online, "this" is a box about 12" square and 3" deep covered in gold wrapping paper.] is a parable box. Before we moved into the season of Lent, we told some stories in Godly Play which were parables. One of the things we have learned is that it is hard to get into parables sometimes. We can knock [knock, knock] on them and ask them to open up but they sometimes don't do that very clearly. Sometimes the messages seem straightforward, but there are often more layers to them that we discover as we continue to read them and pray with them and ask them to reveal more about God to us. We had that experience last week with the parable of the fig tree.

This particular special gold box holds the Parable of the Good Shepherd. When even one sheep is lost or has gone astray, the good shepherd will leave the others and search for the lost one, rejoicing when it is found and returned to the flock. A similar short parable is told in the verses we missed from Luke 15. Included with the parable of the lost sheep is the parable of the lost coin, and now what we commonly call the parable of the prodigal son.

These three parables about things which are lost and then found are a response to a criticism that the Pharisees level against Jesus for eating at table with tax collectors and sinners. For those of us whose dinner is fast food or sitting in front of the television and eating off our laps with the family, the flap doesn't make much sense.

But for the Jews, eating together was literally a religious experience; it was how they celebrated their faith and it was governed by very specific rules. To break those rules by associating with people whose lives were antithetical to Hebrew law was tantamount to rejection of that Law. Jesus

was rubbing elbows, willingly, with people who were not upstanding citizens of the community; with people he was told he should reject because of their sinfulness.

Jesus doesn't argue with them. He tells them three parables, finishing up with this one about a compassionate father who deals graciously with his two sons. We grew up calling it the parable of the prodigal son, thinking it is about the son who was lost and is now found. But it really isn't. The parable doesn't begin: *There once was a man who had a father and an older brother.* It begins: ***There was a man who had two sons.***

Ahh. With that, the lid on the parable box opens a little.

I was thinking of that this week after I got my official chaplain's badge from the Sheriff's Department. You can pin it on, clip it to your belt, or wear it on a chain around your neck. I was told that the detectives often wear it on the chain when they are out on a call because the shiny badge draws the eye of the bad guys to it, and if they shoot at it, the badge is over the bulletproof vest.

The badge in this story that draws our attention is the title: the prodigal SON. And if not that, our eye can be stuck on the older son to whom we can all relate so readily.

But this is a parable about the father: there is where our attention should be. Some alternative titles for this parable have been suggested: The Parable of a father's love, or The Parable of the waiting father. In his book *The Parables of Jesus*, Arland Hultgren places this one in a chapter called "Parables of God's Extraordinary Love for the Lost." Tom Long wrote that this parable presents a picture of divine acceptance so radical and sweeping that it has sometimes generated astonishment and provoked sputtering outrage.

The parable box may be opening a bit for us, but in some ways the story may be no less difficult to hear and no less offensive to our sensibilities about what is fair than it was to its first hearers. Who of us cannot relate to either of the two sons? Both were lost. I suspect that all of us have wasted money on our own gratification. Who hasn't in some way wasted something precious that was an undeserved gift? It's pretty easy for us to relate to the younger son who foolishly and brashly went astray.

The badge on the older son gets our attention in another way. He had been obedient, hard working, and probably virtuous. He did everything right. He stayed down on the farm and was prepared to honor his father by caring for him as he aged. When he heard about the party celebrating the return of the wayward son with all kinds of fancy clothes, jewelry, and HIS fatted calf, he was angry. Who wouldn't wonder about the "fairness" of it all?

The parable box opens wider when we look at the timing and events of the younger son's return. He's lost everything; his money, his home, his inheritance; whatever it was that he took with him. Now there is famine and he is hungry, essentially an indentured servant, doing the most degrading and humiliating thing a Jew could do; work with pigs.

He plans and rehearses his repentance speech. We don't know if he is sincere or if he will use it to manipulate his father into receiving him. Then, Hultgren writes, under the best of circumstances

the father would respond with words of forgiveness and a review of expectations. Perhaps he'd be "on probation" for a time until he earned the trust and means to be independent once again.

We understand that Judaism and Christianity provide for the return of sinners, but to bread and water, not the fatted calf; to sackcloth, not a new robe; to ashes not jewelry; to kneeling, not dancing; to tears, not merriment. And that's Luke's point. God's love for us is so extraordinary that to our human sensibilities, it doesn't compute. Because before the young son got a prepared word out of his mouth, before anything was ever known by the father about sincerity or repentance, he rushed out to meet this lost son, kissed him as a sign of forgiveness and reconciliation, and rejoiced that what was dead had come to life; what was lost had been found.

What is so striking in the father's dealings with both his sons is that he extends unconditional love PRIOR to repentance, indeed even APART from repentance. And with unconditional love is total forgiveness. Tom Wright writes that the attitude of the father toward his sons is not determined by their character, but his. Both brothers are invited back into right relationship with their father.

It is not our remorse that forces God to set the banquet table. It is not our deep desire to start over again that leads God to roast the fatted calf, Long continues. We cannot throw our own party. Good, dutiful behavior does not put God in our debt. Repentance on our parts is a response to the offer of forgiveness which is already present. When the father runs toward us with open arms, it is so unexpected, so undeserved, so contrary to the ways of the world, that we fall down in awe before this mystery.

This is reconciliation with God. It is coming home. There is a coming home theme in all our readings this week. Israel finally comes home to the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua leaving the disgrace of slavery in Egypt behind and David Gushee writes that humanity comes home to a reconciling God through the cross of Jesus Christ. There may be all kinds of ads on television inviting you to come home to the Catholic Church. But Jesus is inviting us all to come home to God.

It is the mystery and beauty of a parable and its gold box which is a gift to you and your children and your children's children. Next time you knock, there will be more revealed about the inauguration of the kingdom of God, more about God's love which surpasses all understanding, and more about the mystery of open arms and the kiss of forgiveness whenever we turn home.

Gail Wheatley+