

Sermon

Lent 4C March 30, 2025

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In today's gospel, the religious leaders are griping about Jesus mingling with the wrong people. In particular, they are outraged that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. We are not immune to such criticisms today. Whenever "the wrong people" are welcomed into a place deemed inappropriate for them, the "right people" begin to gripe. People who smell badly. People who don't dress appropriately. People whose children can't be controlled. People who are a little too enthusiastic. People who are the wrong color. Or the wrong gender. Or the wrong nationality. Or the wrong religion. These are just some of the wrong people whom the right people want to limit or keep out altogether. When we begin allowing the wrong people into places not meant for them, there will be a group of right people complaining about it.

Today's parable from Jesus addresses this very thing. We have come to know this story as the parable of the Prodigal Son, but that isn't really accurate. A more accurate title would be, "The Repentant Son," or, "The Forgiving Father," or, "The Selfish Brother." Either way, this story touches on all these things and is still applicable today. Like most parables, if we are really paying attention to them we can see ourselves in each of the characters; and if we are honest with ourselves, we can admit to being each character.

We have been the younger son who has wanted everything we felt was owed to us. Maybe we got it, or maybe something kept us from getting it, but we eventually (and hopefully) learned that having everything we want isn't all its cracked up to be. This, then, requires we repent of our selfish desires. It takes courage to admit we were wrong. It takes courage to apologize. It takes courage to accept whether or not the offended person will forgive us and to accept how this will impact the relationship moving forward.

We have been the father who had to face rejection from another person and let them go. Maybe it was a child, family member, close friend, whatever. That rejection or some other sin against us can be extremely painful. But we have also been the father who, more than anything, wanted restoration. That desire for restoration allows us to welcome back into our good races those who have hurt us.

We have been the older son who has been loyal but has then suffered the indignity of seeing someone we felt deserving of punishment get off scot-free. That is a hard pill to swallow, especially when it happens close to home.

Although we have been, at one time or another, all three of these characters, I think more often than not we are the older brother. I think that more often than not we are irrationally angry when people whom we think are unworthy of grace receive grace. Or we become resentful of those whom we deem undeserving receive what we see as unwarranted handouts.

I came across a perfect example of this last week.

A woman posted that her psych professor in college offered to give everyone in class a 95 percent grade but only if the students voted unanimously for the proposal. When the vote was tallied, there were 20 students who voted “NO.”

So he put up a poll asking why people voted the way they did and the choices were:

- A. I want a 95 percent
- B. I think I could do better
- C. I don't want a grade I don't deserve
- D. I don't want someone else to get the same grade as me if they didn't study as much

It turned out that all 20 students who voted “NO” in the original question chose option D.

The professor went on to say that he had been doing this experiment for ten years and every year there is always at least one person who doesn't want someone to have what they have because they think that other person doesn't deserve it. There was one comment on this thread that I found spot on – “It's not that I must win, it's that others must lose.”

We've seen this same rationale in everything from student loan debt forgiveness to universal health care and everything in between.

This seems to be the attitude of the older son – having a selfish reason as to why someone else should not have what he has. We need to remember, though, that

God's economy is about love, forgiveness, and joy over and above spite, punishment, and misery.

What might this look like in the here and now? Imagine for a minute that everybody I've talked to in bars, and whom I've told about Saint Luke's, suddenly decided to show up to church on the same day, 40 or 50 strong.

They are the younger son who have lived lives not as we would like or maybe even as we approve. But they've all gathered up their courage and come to a place where they've been told they are welcome. They are a little worried about how they'd be accepted, but they came.

On that Sunday when these 40 or 50 people show up, we are the father who has eagerly been waiting for them. We may not agree with the choices they have made, but they are here and we welcome them home. We greet them with open arms. We make room for them in our pew and help them navigate the BCP, Hymnal, and pew aerobics. After service we invite them to coffee hour, get to know a little bit about them, thank them for being here, and invite them to come back next week. And maybe we are the father for the next Sunday or two.

But at some point, we become the older brother. Maybe it's the third, fourth, or fifth Sunday in when all 40 or 50 people from the bars keep coming back; and they keep coming back Every. Single. Sunday. Maybe it's when they begin singing a little too enthusiastically and off key. Maybe it's when they keep sitting in your pew which you were willing to share for a Sunday or two. Maybe it's when they show up at 9:45, leaving you searching for an open seat or maybe even having to sit in the parish hall, relegated to overflow seating. Maybe it's when they gather to smoke in the parking lot.

Those of you who have been here for years or for generations might begin to resent their presence. You might begin asking the Vestry or me why we are letting these people, who have never shown an interest in church before, have a say in how we do things. That resentment might grow to such an extent that you begin to refuse to even come into this house.

One of the purposes of this parable, and the two that come before it (the lost sheep and lost coin) is to open our eyes to the fact that what brings God joy is not the punishment of others, but the restoration of the lost. The welcoming of the younger

son doesn't mean he is loved more than the older son. It doesn't mean that the older son has been rejected in favor of the younger son. This parable reminds us that the father had two sons and he loved both of them. It reminds us that both of the sons are welcomed into the house. And, maybe most importantly, it reminds us that the celebration has nothing to do with loving one son more and everything to do with restoration from death to life.

May we welcome sinners and outcasts. May we eat with the wrong people. May we lavish on them the same unbounding grace that God lavishes on us. And may we never be jealous of, or offended at, God's love being poured out on another - even if we deem them to be the wrong people.

Amen.