

Sermon – March 31, 2019 – St James

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

So he told them this parable:

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “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 came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

Do you like reunions? The return of a long absent family member?

God is a great lover of reunions. That is one message from this morning's Gospel, the well known story we call 'The Prodigal Son'.

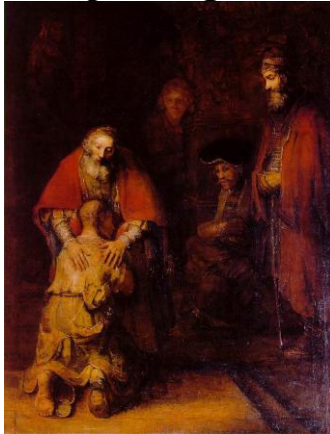
God is the great lover of 'lost and found'. When our children were going to school, it was amazing to see the array of articles accumulated in the 'Lost and Found'; the nice lunch kits, the expensive basketball trainers, the designer hoodies. We can only guess that the owners are so distracted by their busy lives they have not had time nor energy to track down the lost items.

Not so with God...our God's passion is to look for the lost. God is always looking out for those who are floundering. But in this morning's Gospel, we find that souls can be lost without ever leaving home, as was the elder son.

'Prodigal' actually means '**generous**'. It can also mean too generous or wasteful. The younger son was 'prodigal' with his father's wealth. He wasted his inheritance, the inheritance he had brazenly asked for from his father.

We know this story well; its message is central to the Gospel. What is important to remember is that Jesus was telling this parable to the **scribes and Pharisees** because they were grumbling; grumbling because Jesus *welcomed* sinners and ate with them. This parable shows us the reconciling love of God in the character of the father in the story.

I'd like to show you a reproduction of a painting done by Rembrandt.



Here is a wonderful depiction by Rembrandt of the reconciliation between the father and his prodigal or wasteful son. The son is kneeling down at his father's feet, repentant. His father bends over him, his hands on his son's back in a gesture of compassion. It is a wonderful image of the reunion, the re-connection of father and son, both overjoyed.

You'll notice the figure on the right. This is the older son, the one who was dutiful, faithful. He hadn't asked for his inheritance in advance. He hadn't squandered his money away. He stayed home like a good boy and worked hard for his father. He stands apart; stiff, critical,

disapproving, like the scribes and the Pharisees who grumbled at Jesus. He is not part of the reunion although he is present and central to the story. It is significant that Rembrandt included him. In the scripture, the son is not actually there at the reunion. He is out working in the fields and only finds out from a servant when he returns, that a great celebration is on because his brother is back.

So, in the parable, the older son is an important part of the story. **He** had been in the field working all day. When he came home, he heard music and dancing. A party was underway. He asked one of the servants what was going on. Imagine his shock when he learned that the party was to celebrate the return of his dishonourable and rebellious brother. His father has even killed the fatted calf, saved for large celebrations of 100 or more people.

The older son's reaction? He loses his cool; he becomes angry and he refuses to go into the celebration. He stands outside, seething, ready to explode.

The father should have chastised his elder son. Yes, the younger son had done badly, but this elder son was not doing any better. Both sons embarrassed their father—wounded him—but the father comes outside. He greets **both** his sons - the younger son with joy –and the elder son with sorrow.

The elder son responds with poison. He should begin with the respectful “Father”—but, instead, he begins with “LISTEN!” He orders his father to LISTEN to a verbal thrashing. He is like a scolding parent. Most fathers in that time and culture would have knocked him down for his disrespect – but instead, this father listens.

“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.”

How sad that this poor son has felt like a slave all the years he has been working for his father.

“I have never disobeyed your command.” He says. But that's not quite true. He has just refused his father's plea to join the party and in that way has dishonoured him.

“You have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.” Is he happy that his brother, who was dead, is alive again? NO! He is outraged that his father is throwing a party for his no-good brother.

Here is the father's response to his elder son – which ends the story:

“Son, you are always with me,
and all that is mine is yours.
But we had to celebrate and rejoice,
Because this brother of yours was dead

And has come to life'
He was lost and has been found.”

Jesus told this parable in response to the Pharisees and scribes who complained that Jesus **welcomed** sinners and ate with them.

Jesus’ parable shows there are two kinds of sinners, two ways to get lost – those who understand that they are sinners and those who don’t – and God loves both – comes out to greet both – tries to draw in both – both those who know they need saving and those who don’t.

The scribes and Pharisees are just like the elder brother, and those of us who are hard workers, and ‘good Christians’ who do our ‘bit’. We may forget that even if our sins don’t show on the outside, we are sinners too – and we need saving just as much. ‘Good Christians’ work hard, pay their mortgages, raise their kids, and go to church, so what could be wrong with them? In a world full of drug addicts, terrorists and back-sliders, hard-workers who contribute to society shine brightly.

But stop and think a moment about the elder son – a young man who keeps score and finds fault. Do you think that it is any easier for the father to love the elder son than the younger? No. The younger son, flawed though he might be, is easier to love than this humourless, faultfinding, finger-wagging elder son.

But the father loves his elder son ANYWAY!

Just as he loves his younger, prodigal son ANYWAY!

Just as he loves you and me ANYWAY!

The point of these stories is that God loves all of us—you and me and the con artist—IN SPITE OF who we are—not BECAUSE of who we are.

The point of this parable is that none of us, no matter who, whether it’s the bishop, a minister, a vestry member, a lay reader, Sunday school teacher—has **any** claim on our inheritance. Anything we inherit, we receive entirely as a gift from the Father who is God. Some of us work hard, and others not as hard, but that isn’t the point.

God loves us and wants to bring us to the celebration ANYWAY – deserving or not – because, not one of us deserves an invitation to the party – but God wants us all there ANYWAY!

And that is Good News! It is good news for the delinquent younger son. And it is good news for the self-righteous elder son. And it is good news for you and me; whether we are like the disreputable younger son or the critical elder son or a bit of both. It really doesn’t matter what our sins are. God loves us ANYWAY!

In her book, ‘The Hiding Place’, Corrie ten Boom talks about her family learning that their beloved Aunt Jans was ill and had only a few weeks to live. Corrie’s father broke the news to

Aunt Jans in a positive way. “My dear sister-in-law,” he said, “there is a joyous journey which each of God’s children sooner or later sets out on. And Jans, some must go to their father empty-handed, but you will run to Him with hands full!”

The family talked about all the wonderful things Aunt Jans had done – things for which God would reward her – her writings, the funds she had raised for good causes, the talks she had given.

But Aunt Jans wasn’t comforted by their assurances. She began to cry, and finally said through her tears, “empty! Empty!” Then she said, “How can we bring anything to God? What does He care for our little tricks and trinkets?”

Then she regained her composure and prayed this prayer.

“Dear Jesus, I thank You that we must come with empty hands. I thank You that You have done all –all—on the Cross, and that all we need in life or death is to be sure of this.”

All we need is to be sure that our dear Lord Jesus on the Cross has borne it all for us.

Isn’t Lent time to ‘come home’—to walk through the door—to join the celebration.

The veranda light is always on...God is expecting us, **hoping** we’ll appear.

So let us come to the banquet; let us take our places **with** the sinners –

with the very ones we believe are undeserving –

recognizing that there is no difference between us.

Let us pray:

O God, you know us and you love us;

not because of anything we have ever done or accomplished. Amen.

The elder brother was wrong: the son didn’t squander the dad’s property in any serious way—dad was still well off. So we can’t beggar god. Son can stay as long as he wants. He’ll be glad to work. And they’ll all be better off. And happy—even the elder brother if he’d like. That’s the point of the town hall meeting on the green new deal. So much new industry would be produced that there’d be good jobs and new learning. Of course we can afford it. It’s what we’re doing now in extracting resources that will eventually beggar us.

