

Luke 15:11-32
St. John's
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I imagine some of us might be wondering why in the world we end up reading the parable of the Prodigal Son in Lent? As we all know, Lent is that season of the church year when we are called into quiet... to reflect on the health of our spiritual life...to reflect on our relationship with God. But the Prodigal is one of those stories that far from leaving us reflective never fails to stir us up. Instead of finding ourselves pondering our relationship with God, we find ourselves pondering our human relationships....with our fathers or mothers...our sisters or brothers... by blood or in Christ... because the truth is, we can all relate to these characters in one way or another.

Just before this parable, Luke tells us that the Pharisees and Scribes are standing around grumbling because Jesus has welcomed the low-life tax collectors and sinners to eat with him. And lo and behold, now these tax collectors and sinners are coming to hear Jesus teach. And being the great Jewish story teller that Jesus is, he regales the group gathered around him with two parables about a God who not only goes after those who might be lost but rejoices when he finds them. *"...I tell you there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

Now in the ancient world, stories about sheep and women are a dime a dozen and so the Pharisees and the Scribes shrug them off. But then Jesus tells them a third parable...the one about a father and two sons...and this one they can't shrug off.

Jesus begins by telling them about a younger son who has the audacity to ask his father to give him his share of his father's wealth before his father has even died. At this, the Pharisees and the Scribes feel their blood pressure rising. Under the laws of the ancient world, the son's request is disgraceful and it dishonors his father. And yet, for whatever reason, the father decides to give his younger son the third of his estate to which by Jewish law the younger son is entitled to get. As the story goes, the elder son who stands to inherit two thirds of his father's estate makes no waves, asks for nothing and goes on working hard for his father.

Then Jesus says, the younger son flees to another country and squanders all his inheritance. To his credit, when the younger son hits bottom, he doesn't

run home to his father. Jesus says the boy finds himself a job working with pigs and because of a famine, willing to eat carob pods...the food farmers feed their pigs. Upon hearing this, the Pharisees and the Scribes are just plain disgusted. No good Jew would ever have anything to do with pigs much less eat their food because pigs are unclean animals. On the other hand, these men of the law may have been secretly pleased that this younger son is groveling among unclean animals. Perhaps justice has been served.

But then the unthinkable happens. When his hunger gets the better of him, the young son decides to return home. According to Jesus, when the father spots his younger son in the distance, the father runs to him and hugs and kisses him. When the younger son protests *"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."*, instead of accepting his offer, his father calls for the best robe and the fatted calf to be prepared for a feast. By this time, the Pharisees and the Scribes are really disturbed. And if we are honest so are we.

This young guy breaks all the rules of common decency. He has dishonored his father and squandered his fortune on clubs, girls and clothes. He doesn't make the slightest attempt to explain why he did what he did. The only reason this guy runs home is because he is hungry and he knows his father has food. Yet, despite all that he's done, disgraced his father and squandered his inheritance, this kid is embraced by his father and made the center of a big, public celebration.

And so when the older brother has a fit about all the fuss being made over his useless younger brother and refuses to take part in the celebration, we don't blame him one bit. For once we might even find ourselves standing on the same side as the Pharisees and the Scribes. Imagine that. Not only do we understand the older brother, but we identify with his frustration and hurt....because, like the Pharisees and the Scribes, we believe that following the rules should be rewarded. We believe if we go to church, work hard to raise our children, work hard at our jobs, work hard to be good people, give up things for Lent, we are the ones who deserve to be rewarded and celebrated.

Why shouldn't we get stirred up? Why shouldn't we be rattled? We are hardly in the mood to sit quietly and reflect on our relationship with God because right now we're consumed with the injustice of it all. We are standing on the sidelines with the Pharisees and the Scribes wondering who's refereeing this game anyway.

While most of us can probably identify with the parent and the elder son, and even at times the Pharisees and the Scribes, how many of us find ourselves

identifying with the younger son? For my part, I couldn't help wondering what the younger son feels about a system that only allows him 1/3 of his father's estate no matter how hard he works or how he might increase that estate. Might he feel resentful of the attention and affection he perceives his father shows to his older brother, the heir? Does he experience a world that treats him as "an also ran" because he is a second son? Has his older brother ever taunted him or bullied him? Can any of us identify with some of those feelings? Have we ever tried to run away from things that bother us? Have we ever walked in the younger son's shoes?

Henri Nouwen stepped into the younger son's shoes when he wrote this... "I am the prodigal every time I search for unconditional love where it can not be found...leaving home is much more than an historical event bound to time and place. It is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe in an eternal embrace..."

What if the younger son in Jesus' parable leaves home hoping to find the unconditional love that 1/3 of his father's estate might buy him...hoping to buy self-esteem, security, peace and hope. What if we go on a shopping spree or take a vacation, change a job or even decide to move to another neighborhood or city, hoping it will make us feel better...cheer us up...release us from our pain, our fear, our disappointment? What if we too search for a way to find the joy and security, the hope and peace that unconditional love promises us?

What Jesus is trying to tell us is that no matter how far away the young son moves or how much money he spends, he doesn't find what he is looking for. Instead the young son returns home hungry and tired and hopeless. And if we are honest, how often do we put down our newest purchase, settle into our new homes, return home after a vacation only to find ourselves right back where we started. We still experience the same fear, the same disappointments, the same hurt....we are still struggling with the same problems.

So perhaps this is precisely why we read the parable of the Prodigal in Lent. Jesus is telling the Pharisees and the Scribes and he is telling us that God is refereeing this game of life. Life, the abundant life that God wants for us all, is not dictated by the laws of the ancient world nor is it dictated by our rules. It is shaped by God's love for us.

And Jesus shows us something about God's love for us when he tells us about the father's joy at the return of his prodigal son. Isn't this exactly the unconditional love the young son is searching for. It is a love that is able to embrace the whole person including his flaws, his pain and insecurity.

When we follow other voices that we think will offer us other ways to win at life, we in fact are walking in the Prodigal's shoes. And yet, when we return home to God, God embraces us and always rejoices.

And by the way, for those of us who are still trapped in the elder son's psyche, God's love is not exclusive to the younger son. When the elder son refuses to take part in the celebration for his brother, his father rushes out to find him and pleads with his elder son to come to the party. Listen to what he says...*"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."* Listen to that voice because it is God's voice speaking to us.

To me Lent is all about one of the greatest love stories of all times...because it is the story of God's love for us. In giving us his son to teach us, to die for us, to be resurrected for us, God has shown us the shape of a love that can transform us right here and right now.

Perhaps it is a good thing that the Prodigal stirs us up so that our rules can surface into the light of God's love and be transformed. In this Lenten season, let us not only reflect on God's love for us...let us open ourselves to experience its transforming grace... And may this parable remind us that leaving home as if we didn't have one will get us no where...because as Nouwen puts it, "Home is the center of my being where I can hear the voice that says, "You are my beloved, on you my favor rests."

Amen