



Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
March 31, 2019
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was a man who had two sons. They went away to college and became very successful – the older one became a corporate lawyer and the younger one a stock broker. A few years later the two had Christmas dinner together and started bragging about the gifts they had given their dad that year. The older brother said, “I bought dad a 10,000 sq. ft. home and a brand new Mercedes.” The younger brother replied, “that’s nothing, I knew that dad’s eyesight was failing but he loved to read the bible so I hired 5 priests at \$100,000 a year for ten years to train a parrot to recite the entire bible. All dad has to do is call out a chapter and verse and the parrot will recite the scriptures.”

A few days later each brother received a thank you note from their dad. To the older brother he wrote “I live alone in one room of the house but I have to clean the whole thing, so thanks a lot for the mansion. I’m nearly blind so I can’t drive the car, so thanks a lot for the Mercedes.” To the younger brother he wrote, “I can tell you really love me because you sent a truly thoughtful gift – the chicken was delicious!”

Those of us who have been in adult forum these past four weeks have spent quite a bit of time thinking about fathers and their sons as we’ve read and discussed Henri Nouwen’s commentary on today’s story from Jesus: the parable of the prodigal son. This is one of the most famous of Jesus’ stories, it’s right up there with the good Samaritan and the golden rule, as a part of the gospels that even non-Christians are familiar with.

Many commentaries on the gospel of Luke suggest – and I think this is right – that the parable of the prodigal son is the heart of Luke’s message about Jesus. It occupies a central place in the gospel, just a little past the half-way point, and it is one of the longest stories that Jesus tells. It is also unique to Luke – Matthew, Mark, and John do not include it – and it strikes many of the key themes of Luke’s gospel: themes such as God’s special concern for the outcast and the use of big parties and celebrations as a metaphor for the Kingdom and the life of the world to come. So, it’s little wonder that it has been the subject of hundreds of books

and thousands of works of art through the centuries. And over the years I have found at least a dozen different sermons that can be preached from it – depending on what part of the story we choose to emphasize.

This morning I will emphasize just one aspect of the parable: tradition has named it incorrectly. As Henri Nouwen and many others have pointed out, this story is not primarily about the son who runs away and it should not be named for him. This is the parable of the good and loving father and should be named for him. This is really a story about who the father is. It is about his passionate and undying love for both of his sons even though both sons are, each in their own way, as lost and clueless as the two sons in the joke I began with.

The father is, of course, a metaphor for what Jesus reveals to us about God. As the eternal Son of God the Father, Jesus comes into the world to confront us all with the ways in which we have misunderstood the heart of the one who created us. There are many misunderstandings of the Father's love which Jesus confronts in this story, but one stands out: too often we have believed that God loves some people more than others.

This parable of the loving father destroys that myth. As Nouwen says, “The father's heart is not divided into more or less.”¹ There is no division within God in which God loves some of us more than others. There is no division within God in which some people are beloved children and some are hated enemies. God's love embraces both kinds of children: the obedient and the disobedient, the repentant and the self-righteous, the good and the bad.

Our first clue to this truth is in the story's very first line: “there was a man who had two sons.” Before the younger son left home or the older son ever refused to come into the they were both sons. Not two servants, or two enemies, or two creatures that might become sons if they worked hard enough, but simply “two children.” Whether far from home or sulking in the dark in the backyard they never cease to be the Father's sons. They are both included. They are both loved. And they are both, at different times, completely blind to that inclusion and love – but their blindness does not change their status with the father, it only changes *how they experience* their relationship with their father.

What you and I need – and what the whole world needs – is a better *experience* of our relationship with our heavenly father. We need to have our blindness to God's love and faithfulness healed so that we no longer experience our relationship with our Father in negative and destructive ways. And it is the healing of our blindness to God's love that Jesus came to accomplish – not just for some of us but for all of us; for both kinds of children, the run-aways and the stay-at-homes. As St. Paul says in our Epistle reading today “. . . in Christ

God was reconciling *the world* to himself . . .” The Greek word translated there as “world” is the word “kosmos” – as in the whole universe, the entirety of creation, being reconciled to God.

This is the heart of what it means to be saved through Christ. To be saved is not to be saved from an angry and punishing God. To be saved is to be saved from our own blindness, from the dead-end paths of life down which we have walked and in which we have been trapped. To be saved is to be saved by Christ from an eternity of homelessness (like the younger son) or an eternity of sulking anger out in the darkness (like the older son). To be saved is to be saved from the brokenness and sin of our own poor choices and our failure to trust in God’s infinite love for us – and our failure to trust in God’s infinite love for the whole cosmos.

So, the parable of the loving father is a story about how we all are God’s adopted children through Christ and how we are all, each in our unique way, blind to that identity and to that love. As we finish, then, notice how the loving father responds to our need. He goes out of the house, running to meet the younger son, and goes out of the house to plead with the older son to convince him to come in to the party. These are both actions which, in the culture of that day, were beneath the dignity of the powerful and wealthy head of a family in the same way that dying naked, nailed to a cross seems beneath the dignity of an all-powerful God. God’s love for us is so passionate and faithful that he does not stand aloof in the dignity of divinity, but stoops down in grace to gather us up in his arms.

As we pass the half-way point of Lent we hear in this parable a calling to repentance and to renewed faith – not a calling to appease an angry father but a calling to allow the beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to heal our blindness and open our hearts to the truth of who God really is and who we really are. The questions that we should ask ourselves in the coming days as we approach the cross and resurrection of Christ are the same that Nouwen asks at the end of his book:

The question is not ‘how am I to find God?’ but ‘how am I to let myself be found by him?’ The question is not ‘how am I to know God’ but ‘how am I to let myself be found by him?’ And, finally, the question is not ‘how am I to love God?’ but ‘how am I to let myself be loved by God?’²

Amen.

1. Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A story of homecoming*. Doubleday, Image Books, New York, 1992. pg. 103

2. *Ibid.* pg. 106