

The Gift of Forgiveness Psalm 32 Luke 15: 1 & 2; 11-32

The parable of Jesus as found in our Gospel reading is likely a familiar one and typically known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This parable is found in Scripture ONLY in Luke's gospel- chapter 15- our scripture for today. Often parables- Jesus preferred way of teaching using worldly examples with heavenly or spiritual meanings- are included in several gospels, but not this one. I find it interesting that, even today, the Parable of the Prodigal Son may be familiar to many folks, in and out of the church, in spite of its singular location in Scripture. What is it about this parable that makes it memorable? What message might it have for us today? What reality might we face as a result of considering this parable?

First of all, it seems helpful to consider the context or the setting for Jesus' teaching with this parable. To whom was he speaking- what issue might he be attempting to address? Luke 15 begins by noting the "tax collectors and sinners coming to listen to Jesus." It also indicates that the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling saying, "this fellow (Jesus) welcomes sinners and eats with them." As Luke points out, Jesus' preaching was drawing the interest of a crowd of folks considered to be the kind of people to be avoided- tax collectors and sinners- the lowest of the low on the social registry of that time. The fact that Jesus was drawing less than desirable crowds who wanted to listen to him, was worrisome to the establishment, but when Jesus went so far as to eat with them- that was truly out of line.

The Pharisees and scribes- closely involved in the religious life of the day believed they held the highest level of society. They took note of what was happening and seem quick to find fault with Jesus, likely looking for a way to stop him. As Jesus hears their grumbling, he uses this opportunity to teach through the Parable.

The Parable- a man had two sons. The younger of the two, possibly tired of the drudgery of working on the farm asks his father for his portion of the inheritance so he could see the world. In first century Jewish tradition the oldest son would be the ONLY one to inherit anything. This oldest son would then be responsible for taking care of the rest of the family, including in this case, the younger son. It wasn't law, but a long- standing tradition. It is quite presumptuous of the younger son to ask for "his" inheritance- something he typically would not have until his father died and the older brother would be expected to share a portion of the wealth. The father breaks with tradition and responds to his son's request. The younger son leaves home for a "distant country" where he lives it up until money runs out. Eventually, he finds himself forced to feed pigs and eat their food rather than starve. He faces the reality of his situation and goes humbly back to his father- willing to be a slave- no longer a son. Rather than an angry father for which he was prepared, he finds a father who has been waiting for him with open arms, overjoyed to have him back. The father orders the finest

robe, a ring for his son's finger and sandals for his son's feet. NOTE: The mention of sandals on his feet may seem strange, but it indicates visual proof of the father's statement of his son's status as a son not a slave. Generally, slaves did not cover their feet. The fatted calf- raised especially for important celebrations- was ordered killed and a feast prepared for the homecoming. The older son, hearing the music and dancing, checks out what the celebration is all about. Rather than be happy his brother was safely home, he becomes angry and refuses to be a part of it. When the father begs him to join the festivities, he reminds the father of his many years of faithfulness with no reward. He fails to even acknowledge his younger brother and calls him, "this son of YOURS!" The father reminds him that all the father has already belongs to him- the older brother. It is time to celebrate that the younger son is now alive and home safely. The parable ends leaving us with the father attempting to reason with the older brother.

What is the reality we might find if we attempt to put today's face on the individuals in this Luke 15 Scripture? If we are honest about each of them, we may find some of ourselves and our actions in them. As we face what we see, Jesus' voice may be heard speaking to us.

From tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees and scribes to the father and his two sons, let's take a few minutes to consider each as Luke has laid out. The Pharisees and scribes objected to the tax collectors and sinners being drawn to Jesus' preaching. In today's world, we might consider the tax collectors to be rich, possibly less than honest Wall Street brokers and the sinners as drug dealers, criminals, and gang members. Then there are the Pharisees and scribes themselves- we might consider them to be the "better than thou" people who hold to strict laws in church and society.

What about the individuals in the parable? What about the son who wanted to experience the wider world- a world where money, possessions and enjoyments take precedent? Was living in the moment his primary motive? What about the older son- the one who seemed to have followed all the rules, worked hard and had done everything right? His angry words show he was jealous and probably had fumed for years over the lack of acknowledgment for all he had done for his father. His anger and hurt kept him from being happy that his brother came back safely- so angry he refused to come to the celebration. What about the father? Most commentaries see him as an image of a loving, forgiving, and patiently waiting God. The God who reaches out to each of us with open arms while we are being reminded that all God has to offer is available to each of us.

We experienced that loving God earlier as we baptized Hayden and Aaliyah- God whose arms we can be confident will always welcome us.

*What makes the parable memorable? The Parable of the Prodigal Son reminds us of the possibility, promise and hope of our becoming new, forgiven people. In spite of how sinful I know I am, God promises only love, and forgiveness. How can we argue with God?

*What message might we find? I believe this parable is appropriately placed in the lectionary for us to consider during this contemplative time of Lent. As we face the reality of our own relationship with God, it is not for us to make judgements as to whether others are entitled to God's patience and grace. God's open arms are waiting for anyone who responds in humility to the unbelievable gift of eternal life.

*What can be our response and thus our promise? Facing the reality of our need for God's grace, we need only to humbly return home to God's loving and open arms. As we face the reality of that awesome gift of grace we have been promised, our lives, attitudes and relationships can be changed. From Psalm 32 we read, "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit."

Hear again the words of the Call to Worship with which we began today-

Come as you are, broken and burdened, and find healing in God's goodness.

Come as you are, gifted and beloved, and find purpose in God's calling.

Come as you are, weary and wary, and find comfort in God's embrace.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and worship God with gladness.

Amen

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