

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 31, 2019
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Today, we have a familiar story - so familiar even that we almost don't hear it even more. So, I would like to retell this story for you.

Once upon a time, a boy grows up on the family farm. It was a rural life, spent mostly on the land tending the animals and working the fields. This boy, now a young man, is restless. He says to his father, "I am done with this farm business. I want to leave and go to the big city far away, and see what there is to see. This life isn't really for me; I want something more exciting." So, this son asks his father essentially to cash out what would be his future inheritance. His father is saddened by this because he can very well guess where this will lead, knowing that his son is headstrong and foolish. But he gives his son the money anyway, because he loves him and knows that this boy needs to make his own way in the world.

So, the inevitable plays out. The young man goes off with his inheritance to some first-century Las Vegas and, entranced by the delights and wonders, blows the whole pile of money on wine, women, and song until he doesn't have two cents to rub together. He eventually has no choice but to find work or starve to death, but he finds that difficult because his only skills are in farming and the harvests have been bad for some time so jobs are few. He finally finds work on a pig farm and keeps at it long enough to realize the pigs are living better than he is, and so he decides to return home.

Now, whether or not this Prodigal Son is truly repentant doesn't seem to make much of a difference. We are told that he has worked up the right words to say but the text doesn't bother to convince us that he has truly seen the error of his ways and has turned over a new leaf. To our surprise, it turns out that it doesn't matter. You see, the boy's father has kept vigil over the loss of his younger son. He has eagerly and hopefully watched and waited for his return. And, finally, one day he sees his son, thin and tired, trudging home. "Oh joy!" the father exclaims, and he drops everything and races across the fields to meet him. He grabs hold of his dirty, hungry, and desperate son, rejoicing in his return. He summons his workers to prepare for a feast and celebration – his son has come home!

Before the Prodigal Son can even make his half-baked excuses and apologies, his father covers him with the family's best robe, he places a ring on his finger and sandals on his bare, dusty feet. The Son, Prodigal no longer, is restored to his rightful place in the family... all it took was returning home. He has been restored and reconciled, and now it is time to eat, dance, and sing in joy.

Meanwhile, there has been another character, another son, lurking about in this story. This elder son quietly watched his little brother's leaving with a sneer of disdain, not to mention a bit of competitive pleasure, as he knew his younger brother was barely more than a boy and his path would surely lead to self-destruction. While the younger brother threw caution to the wind and left the family for the big city and bright lights, the elder brother's plan was the complete opposite. He stayed and tried to earn his father's love and favor by being the good and dutiful son. His plan for success was one of restraint of passions and single-minded focus on the work of the farm.

But his goodness was undermined by his resentment and jealousy, so now that his bratty brother has returned, he is incensed at how his family reacts. How dare they simply welcome this selfish and ungrateful son and restore him within the family! He is disgusted that they fall for the brother's lame excuses and can't believe that instead of giving this Prodigal Son a good tongue-lashing, they throw him a big party! The dutiful son is bitter that his father has never thrown such a party for him, forgetting in his self-righteous anger that, amid the busyness of his dutiful service, he never once asked for one.

The story of the older brother demonstrates that you don't even have to leave home to distance yourself from the family. But when he refuses to join the party and sits outside to sulk, his father comes out to find him and implores him to join the family in their celebration. When the elder son can't help himself but to complain bitterly to his father about the injustice of it all, his father again chooses reconciliation and restoration of relationship with his children. With gentleness and compassion in his voice, the forgiving father tells his jealous son, "your brother has never been a threat to my love and favor – I have always loved you. Don't be envious of this attention on your brother, for you are also my precious child and what is mine is yours."

Our story ends here and doesn't reveal what the elder brother does next. We are left to wonder.... Does he stay outside all night and wallow in self-pity? Does his resentment keep him at a distance from the family for a few days? A few weeks? Or does the love and generosity found in his father's voice soften his heart and he joins the family and the party? I like to think that he does. I like to imagine that, warmed and loose because of the wine and laughter, he even becomes the life of the party, singing and dancing around with the lampshade on his head. Who knows? It could've happened.

But there is no need to wonder about what the father will do. This forgiving father rejoices at the restoration of all children into the family –of the return of the younger son today, as well as the future return of his brother. The time to rejoice and celebrate is now, and will be again and again whenever those who have been lost are found.

In this parable, Jesus reveals a great truth about God – that God's greatest desire, greatest yearning and dream, is that all of God's children and the whole of creation is reconciled to him and restored to wholeness within God's family. We are made by God to be in loving relationship, harmony, and communion with God, each other, and all creation. We are made for relationship....and we are never truly whole without community.

While this is God's wish for us, God never compels us to be in relationship. We are loved and honored, and as such, are granted the freedom to choose to break relationship, to opt for self rather than communion. We are allowed the freedom to make ourselves miserable, to hurt others, and to starve ourselves of love and intimacy. And yet, we are always invited to return. Over and over again, as often as needed, we are granted the freedom to leave and are always allowed to come home. And what is important, apparently, is the return itself, not necessarily our demonstrated excellence in contrition. It is enough, it seems, that we simply return, for whatever reasons.

And even more than being assured that if we knock on the door it will be opened, we are promised that our return will be eagerly awaited. God will in fact step away from the house and scour the horizons looking for his wayward children to wear themselves out and stagger home. Upon seeing our sad, hungry, and desperate faces, He will rush out to embrace us and carry us inside. And once inside, He will restore us to wholeness within the family and celebrate our return.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry writes, "In the end, this parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion, and justice of God –deeper, wider, and higher than our imaginings." The Prodigal Son imagines that if he returns home and begs, he will at least be treated as well as the slaves of the farm. Instead, he is embraced and restored fully as a worthy son of the family, with all the rights, privileges, and favor that was his before he left. The dutiful yet jealous brother feels that he has been denied just this kind of good and generous treatment and he distances himself from the family by refusing to join the party. Instead of being rejected for his resentfulness and ingratitude, his father leaves the celebration to find him and remind him that he has always had his father's favor and love.

Rather than seeing the world with Kingdom eyes, we, like both of the brothers in this story, usually view God and His kingdom through the eyes of the world– eyes blinded by a perceived economy of scarcity – that of limited resources, favor and gift. In this economy, we play a zero sum game, so that what one person is given somehow results in a net loss for us. But in this parable,

Jesus reveals that the economy in the Kingdom of God is very different. In God's economy, God's love and favor rain down on us all, saints and sinners alike, for God desires that all of His children know and enjoy their full membership in His family. When we have left and are lost, God scours the horizons, watching and waiting for us to realize our folly, and then rejoices outrageously when we return.

Upon our homecoming, God eagerly returns to us our robe and ring, our outer marks of membership in God's family, and we are made new again. Our sins are forgiven, our burdens released, and we are reconciled with the father who never left us, even as we left him. This father takes us back into the fold and our return is celebrated. And what a celebration it is in God's family – the carpets are rolled back and the music is turned up, barbeque is lit and the neighbors called over...it is time for rejoicing! For, the beloved child who once was lost is now found...the one who was dead is alive again!

Amen.