

4 Lent C
"The Party's On"
March 14, 2010

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The text for this morning's message is the Gospel lesson for this day.

Of all the stories Jesus told, I expect that the "Parable of The Prodigal Son" is both the best known and the best-loved. But did you know that the word "prodigal" never shows up in the Bible - at least not in the part that God wrote?

It comes to us, instead, from somewhere around the 15th century when many Bibles were published with little headings over the chapters. It was the time of Shakespeare, who liked the word, "prodigal" as well. In Shakespeare in Love he is a prodigal who spends all his money and gets what he deserves – a rogue, but an affable and generous man.

That sounds rather romantic but I've never thought of the Prodigal that way – too much corn cobs and pig slop – but he is the one most people identify with because the Father seems too good, too generous, and the elder brother, too prissy, picky, and obnoxious to see ourselves as one of them.

Of course, that's the fun of parables. Whether told to an audience of enraptured tax collectors, ex-prostitutes and other sinners of renown on one side and Pharisees and scribes on the other looking pious and uncomfortable or to an audience of reasonably well-behaved Minnesota Lutherans, parables get under the skin of your soul. Just when you think you've got your mind wrapped around them, a little voice (experience? Conscience? God's Spirit that lives within us?) a little voice nags at us, chips away at our assumptions and asks us to take one more look, from a different angle, and when we do, it's as if another door has opened for us.

It all seems so cut and dried: two kinds of people. But you know that isn't true is it? People come in all kinds. Good people are capable of evil; evil people are capable of good. Saint and Sinner - that's what we are. And the only thing that gives us hope is that Jesus is in our midst, and through Him, we come to know of this Father. The Father, who in His story had two sons, neither of whom, apparently had a clue about their father's true nature, which is where the story is headed.

But let's not rush things. The younger says to his father, "Hey dad, let's pretend you're dead." Oh, the Gospel makes it sound a little more polite, but it wasn't. To ask for your

inheritance ahead of time is not like putting your name on a family knick-knack, so it eventually comes to you. It is declaring your father dead to you and making off with 1/3 of his estate. That's how it was divided - the oldest son got 2/3's in order to maintain the family business and care for his widowed mother as well as providing dowries for any sisters. The younger son (or sons) split the other 1/3 of the inheritance.

When Jesus has the younger son speak so audaciously even the tax collectors and sinners as well as the scribes and Pharisees had the same reaction – “What kind of a scumbag son shows so little respect for his father?” But it is not until the parable sinks in that you realize the Father Jesus is talking about is God and that all of us have acted that way toward Him. That's what sin is - a rebellion, making God into nothing – making God into nothing and your self or some person or thing into that which you want more than God and you'll treat God any way you want to get it.

The father consents. At great personal risk, he divides his property between his sons and lets the younger one go. What's different is that the elder son doesn't get his yet. Oh, his name is on it, but he has no control over any of the property or money until his father dies. The younger one, however, converts it all to cash, "in a few days," Jesus said, implying that in his haste to get away, he sold it for less than it was worth. And again, the God-connection is floating around in this, reminding us that we, too, fail to fully and faithfully reckon God's worth to us. Pay attention too, that in Jesus' day, things like this were noised around the community. Gossip. Lots of it. All about a worthless son and a spineless father. And the only one who looks good at this point is the elder brother who is still trudging off to work in the fields like the good boy he always was.

The story continues. Packing his bags, mostly with cash, off goes to the prodigal to a "distant country (where he) squandered his property in dissolute living." Distant, because he has shamed himself and his family back home. He knew that would happen - people always want to run away when they can't face the consequences of their choices, hoping for a fresh start and denying what all of us come to learn eventually - that we carry our problems with us. We have all heard the ads on TV and the Radio that promise "what happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas?" Well, it doesn't. What you do shapes what you become. Yes, there is repentance. There is forgiveness, but nobody gets through life without self-inflicted scars. Nobody.

When our text says he "squandered his property in dissolute living" you get and don't get the picture. Literally, the Gospel says he "scattered" it. It's the same word used for a farmer "scattering" seeds as he sows a field. Never mind that later the elder brother accused his brother of spending it all on prostitutes - that says more about the elder than it does the younger, Jesus' only point was that in taking his father's goods, the prodigal sowed the seeds of his bleak future in a barren field. And then, because, just like it is for us, things happened outside of his control, the market crashes, his new-found friends move on, he finds himself, not

just broke (because there's worse things than broke) but alone. The party's over. It's pig time - big time!

To the Jews, of course, pigs were unclean, disgusting, ungodly, put on this earth only to give them an example of awful. And what your Gospel calls "pods" as the food of choice for pigs and of desperation for prodigals, well, not even pigs want to eat them. They were carob pods – lots of grams of fiber in each, if that's what you're looking for, but basically pithy pods o' bark.

Jesus said that amid the pigs and the pods, the young man "came to himself," one of those "aha" moments in life - moments we all come to when we realize how low we have sunk and how desperate we have become. State mandated rehab works for some. No such option for our young prodigal. He is going to try a ploy, "treat me like one of your hired hands," let me pay off the debt, let me salvage my self-respect by paying for my mistakes.

And Jesus let that stand for a moment, because you see, all of them listening - scribes, Pharisees, tax collectors, sinners, pastors, people in the pews, all of us think alike. We all come back to our father clinging to the hope that there is something we can do to make it up, make it better, make it go away. I want to say more about that in minute, so hold that thought because there's another prodigal in the story - the brother who never left.

He, too, is extravagant, scattering the seeds of his bitterness every day he goes off "working like a slave," for his father. By the time Jesus got to that part, the sinners are sneering at the Pharisees, and the scribes are glaring at the tax collectors who are enjoying this turnabout a bit too much. The elder brother is just as clueless about their father as his prodigal sibling. He has no joy in his heart, not even over a "brother who was dead and lost, come alive and found."

And if we're tempted to judge him, the parable turns into a mirror and shows us every time we delight in people getting what's coming to them; when we'd like to see them suffer for their stupidity or the cruelty they've shown us, as though we never stumble, never falter, never fail, never hurt others. There's not a whole lot to be said for prodigal elder brothers, except this: they, too, are welcome in the father's house, what's His is theirs, always has been, always will be. But they will never join the party unless they "get rid of the attitude – leave it at the door" and walk into the celebration.

Once they come inside, "The Party's On." Not because the younger comes to his senses, but because he comes home. Not because the elder has never disobeyed, but because the Father has come out to the porch to invite him in – the Incomprehensible Love of the Father reaches out to both His prodigal (in the usual sense of the word) sons.

Because the true "prodigal" (the one who scatters with abandon) is really the Father who scatters forgiving love as though He's got an endless supply. Because God does! I told you to remember that the younger came home with an offer on the table - to be a hired hand. But the

Father has none of it. The son is still far off down the road, and a waiting, anxious father sees him, hikes up his robe and runs to meet him.

Never mind what everybody else thinks. Never mind that true gentleman of the estate never ran, never exposed his hairy, spindly legs in public. Never mind that everybody knows that it is the guilty who must grovel and the righteous who must be appeased, the Father breaks all the rules and rushes to embrace his smelly son. He calls for sandals and a robe and ring. And the fatted calf is put on the barbeque.

I love happy endings, don't you? But that's the point. Where God is in forgiveness and love, no matter how rough the road back home, the ending is always happy. Never before had anyone talked about God that way. Jesus was the first, but then again, nobody knows the Father as well as His own Son. In the mystery of the Trinity – in the conversation between Father, Son and Spirit the heart of the father so passionate for His "distant-country" children agonizes over their redemption and waits for their return. The Father can't contain the joy when in the distant the prodigal returns and the Father's love sees the angry "at home prodigal" and listens to the anger, reminds him of the plenty that has always been his and won't hear of their past or future labor as payment for simply living as the Father's child and heir - He simply throws the party.

That is our message - the message of reconciliation through the cross, Paul called it in today's second reading. Through the cross everyone can come home to God's love and care – not one need be lost! That is a message to take to heart. That is a message to share! Amen.

Now may our merciful and all-embracing Father clothe us with His garments of grace, welcome us to His table and teach us the gift of compassion.