



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Outrageous!

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 6, 2016
The Fourth Sunday in Lent —Based on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*

Today we hear this parable from Luke, usually called the parable of the Prodigal Son. That doesn't do justice to its complexity. A better name would be the parable of the Father and Two Sons.

It's one of the best-known parables, which may make it harder for us to hear. It's hard for us in 2016 in Manhattan to hear how truly outrageous the behaviors described in this parable are. But then, we are living in a time of outrageous behaviors ...

Luke has Jesus tell this parable in the context of the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Important to note: this is not intended to be anti-Jewish. The Pharisees and scribes are a particular group within Judaism of the time who were concerned with keeping strict religious laws and purity. We all can be Pharisees in our own ways, can't we? I have a very Episcopalian friend who works out a lot and keeps a strict diet. He has grace enough to recognize himself as a fitness Pharisee.

The Pharisees and scribes are hardly alone in worrying about associating with the wrong sort of people. What parent hasn't worried about the company their daughter or son is keeping? "Birds of a feather" ... The key word here is *grumbling*.

Back to the parable. Clearly this not what I like to call the mythical functional family.

The younger son demands his share of the inheritance. This would have been like saying to his father, "Old man, I wish you were dead." Disrespect and insult on this level would have shocked the community's breath away, not to mention the family's, surely breaking the father's heart. Maybe this has always been the "problem child," the "spoiled one." We don't know. But remember, in this culture a person's identity derived from his/her family, their clan, their tribe, their position within the community. One literally had no identity outside the family/clan/tribe. Asking for an inheritance early was simply unthinkable. Sons were to care for their parents in their old age.

That is not what this younger son does. He takes the money and runs—to a far country. Likely many of us have spent some time in a far country ... not necessarily a physical location, but a state of being where we betray our true and best selves.

We're told that in this far country, the younger son "squandered his property in dissolute living." Dissolute, meaning wasteful, riotous living. Not necessarily immoral. The older son accuses him of that, but then he's not the most reliable source, as we'll see.

Interestingly, "prodigal" doesn't always have a bad connotation. It can mean generous, abundant, even extravagant. Think of prodigy, or prodigious talent. This younger son may have spent lavishly and generously—staying in luxury hotels, flying in private planes, another round of drinks for my friends.

He spends everything. Then famine strikes. Circumstances beyond his control change his life. Natural disasters and man-made disasters have a way of doing that. We know famine—the collapse of the mortgage industry, layoffs, downsizing/right-sizing, the teetering of world markets.

He takes the only work he can find—as a day laborer, feeding the pigs—an unimaginable situation for someone raised in a good Jewish family. Even so, he is starving.

He “comes to himself.” The real translation is, “He got smart.” Light bulb. He hatches a plan to work as a day laborer for his father; at least there he wouldn’t be working with pigs and he’d have food. So he writes and practices his speech ... rehearsing over and over until he has it just right.

The younger son travels back. While he was still far off, his father sees him, is filled with compassion, and RUNS to meet his son.

We need to stop right there. In that culture, a man did NOT run. Children ran, women ran; men did not run. The father publicly humiliates himself—again. In this culture, the father is acting just as outrageously as his younger son! First, he accepts his son’s insult and actually gives him his inheritance, bringing shame on his own family and on the community, the village. Such an action would have shaken, even angered, the neighbors. How could this happen in our community? It threatens our security. If it can happen to this family, it could happen to us.

And now, running to meet this son. The son, sure enough, starts his well-rehearsed speech: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your son.” That’s as far as he gets. Before he knows it, he’s dressed in the best robe, a ring, and new shoes. Outward, visible signs that he is not just welcomed home, he is reinstated as his father’s son. And then there is a party—a very public party, with all the neighbors invited, to make sure they get the point. My son is not back in disgrace; he is back in his rightful place as my son. He was dead and now he is alive, and we are going to celebrate the heck out of that! Can you imagine the look on the son’s face? I just wanted regular meals ... now all this

If the parable ended there, we could say, “and everyone lived happily ever after.” But ... the complexity of families ... there is the older son. Who by the way, as the older son, would have inherited twice as much as the younger son: 2/3 of his father’s property. Older son, with all the rights and privileges and baggage that go with being the oldest child: “First borns tend to be more rule-seeking, conscientious, and neurotic but score lower on dimensions of openness to new experience.” [Dalton Conley, a professor of sociology, medicine and public policy at NYU, quoted in http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/04/signs-youre-dealing-with-an-oldest-child_n_4152177.html]

The older son is out in the field, presumably staying at home, dutifully working and taking care of family and property, which is now all his. He finds out about the party accidentally, wasn’t even invited. He pouts/storms outside. Father goes out to the older son, just as he did to the younger. Older son speaks very disrespectfully to his father, just as disrespectfully as the younger son had. Unthinkable in this culture. In his anger—or maybe spitefulness—the older son says things that aren’t true. You never even gave me even a young goat ... Well, actually, I gave you all that I had. All that is mine is yours. Literally.

Like older children everywhere, the older son is protesting loudly, “That’s not fair!”

At this point, we may start to feel sorry for the father. How awful to have two such disrespectful sons. Then we might edge into judgment: he must be a terrible, weak, foolish father to have raised two such awful sons ... and where is that mother anyway; she couldn’t have been any help.

And there we are. When we go there, we become the ones grumbling and judging.

This parable is left open-ended. So how do you think it ends? Does the older son “come to himself” and go in and join the celebration? Might he even welcome his brother home? Does the mother suddenly appear and drag the older son inside by the ear? Does the younger son go out to the older son, to his brother?

This parable is about celebrating together when what was lost has been found. Here, what was lost and then found was not an animal (like the 1 sheep out of 100) or an object (like the 1 coin out of 10), not a possession. What was lost and then found is more even than a person: it’s relationship. This celebration is about restoration of relationship.

We may have run off to a far land, squandered our inheritance and lost ourselves in dissolute living, which can take so many forms. We may have acted foolishly, publicly humiliated ourselves. We may have brought hardship on ourselves and our families. We may have behaved horribly and caused a lot of damage.

God welcomes each of us home, back into our primary relationship as beloved children of God, whatever we have done or not done. By each of us, I mean not just good Episcopalians in church on Sunday morning. God also welcomes home those who aren't in any church, those who've done awful, hurtful, damaging things—things that have destroyed relationships.

Think of what you may have done. Think of the person who has hurt you the most. Think of the people who have done the most awful deeds and caused the most damage and suffering in your life, in our community, in our nation, in the world. Each of these God welcomes home with open arms, no questions asked.

You may know there are two Greek words for “time.” *Chronos* means our time: minutes, hours, days, years. *Kairos* means God's time. We need to live by *chronos*, and we also need to recognize *kairos*. God's time isn't our time.

I don't know if there are Greek words for these, but I believe the same holds true for “fair.” There is our version of what's “fair” or “right,” and there is God's version of “fair” and “right.” They are not mutually exclusive, but neither are they the same. God's love and forgiveness and mercy aren't “fair” in our terms. God's love and forgiveness and mercy are completely outrageous!

In this season of Lent, we talk much of repentance. Repentance, meaning turn around. Literally, to turn (change) one's way of thinking. This parable invites us to change our way of thinking.

Can we hear challenge and the invitation in this open-ended parable? Can we recognize we are the ones whom God welcomes home? Can we recognize that the people we like least, those who've done horrible things, are also the ones God welcomes home?

Will we stay outside and criticize? Or will we recognize the restored relationship, and go in to the party?