



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

The Story of the Two Prodigals

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 27, 2022

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

It's been a month and four days since the invasion of Ukraine began. Still reeling from the pandemic, most people I talk to find this latest conflict almost more than they can bear. (And, personally, I was relieved to attend a Spring Retreat with the House of Bishops last week, because I didn't have a television in my room and, for a short period of time, I wasn't constantly reminded of the horrors of this conflict.)

The horror of...

- Families tearfully separated.
- Maternity wards bombed.
- Innocent women and children wounded and killed.
- Elderly people displaced, homeless, and terrified... and so much destruction all around.

It makes people of faith wonder, "What's going on here? How does God work?"

Jesus quickly discovered the people of *his* time didn't understand how God worked at all. It's interesting how people want religious people to act in a certain predictably pious manner. The truly religious, they feel, should never be found fraternizing with "ordinary people." Jesus finds that eating with tax collectors and sinners gets him into just about as much trouble with the righteous as almost anything else he does. In fact, today's gospel lesson from Luke begins with the Pharisees and the scribes "grumbling" about Jesus' welcoming sinners and eating with them.

So Jesus tells three stories. The first concerns a man who loses a sheep, and the second story is about a woman who loses a coin. Each of these stories goes to extravagant lengths to explain what the protagonists go through to find what they've lost. And then they describe the subsequent celebration of the recovery. The story of the Prodigal Son is the third story in this trilogy.

Now this may be the most beloved and well-known parable in the entire New Testament. We usually refer to this story as the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. The word *prodigal* means "wastefully or recklessly extravagant." But the term could just as easily be applied to the father as to the son in this story.¹ The father would have been regarded by his contemporaries as shamefully and recklessly wasteful as well.

Now, tax collectors were reviled, well, because they were tax collectors, but also because they were viewed as collaborators with the occupying Roman army. And, as is mentioned elsewhere in scripture, they often collected just a little more money than they were legally entitled to collect. And "a sinner" in

this context isn't someone who's done something especially wrong so much as someone who isn't working towards living a righteous life before God. The Pharisees would never have claimed they were sinless; they would have been quick to acknowledge their imperfections. But they would still claim to be righteous, people striving to live a righteous life.

But we find Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with tax collectors as if he makes absolutely no distinction between them and all those good people who are working hard to live a righteous life. If he was a true prophet, his critics believed, he would know better. Jesus is criticized here for being a prodigal for taking the things of God and lavishing them, wasting them, on those who simply don't deserve them.

In an ancient "honor and shame" culture, this whole story would have struck Jesus' audience as utterly outrageous and shameful right from the start. The behavior of the younger son would have been nearly incomprehensible to an ancient audience. It's as if the younger son wishes his father dead. It's a total rejection of his familial and societal obligations. But the only thing more outrageous than the actions of the younger son in the parable are the responses of his father. He, too, acts in a scandalous way by giving the younger son his inheritance to begin with.

The travels of the younger son to "a distant country" suggest that he goes to a Gentile country—a fact confirmed by the presence of the pigs, ritually unclean animals for the Jews. So when this young Jewish boy is slopping the pigs and longing for their food, Jesus' original audience is thinking he's receiving exactly the complete degradation his actions deserve.

In his joy in receiving the boy home, the father dismisses the son's prepared statement asking for forgiveness. He calls for the best robe, for the sandals (which no slave ever wore), for the family signet ring; and then the father makes arrangements to celebrate the younger son's return with a great feast. And, if the listeners of Jesus thought giving the inheritance to the younger son was a shameful act, that would have been nothing compared to this unconditional welcome home!

As Jesus' original audience would have understood it, none of the characters in this story have, so far, acted with anything approaching respectability. So, now, enter the elder son. As the third character in the story, Jesus' audience would have expected the elder son to be the hero, the one who would serve as a model of honor and propriety, the one who would provide an alternative to the shameful behavior of the other two characters in the story. And, my-oh-my, the elder son does not disappoint.

First, he's dutiful, faithfully working in the field all the time. Working, working, working while his father has been neglecting his duties watching for the younger son to return home. Second, the elder son refuses to participate in the "Welcome Home" festivities. He refuses to act as if nothing has happened. Within the values of Jesus' audience, the elder son is the model of honor and social propriety, with the younger brother and the father serve as the embarrassment. It's the elder son who is seeking to safeguard the family honor and the values of the community to which they all belong.

But here the story takes an unexpected turn. The father responds to his elder son with the memorable concluding lines, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead, and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." In this dramatic ending, the father's actions, as shameful as they may have first appeared, are now vindicated. And Jesus has reasonably and eloquently defended his practice of spending time with tax collectors and sinners, while, at the very same time, revealing something of what the Kingdom of God is like. In this parable, Jesus has given an answer to his hearer's questions, "What's going on here? How does God work?"

At the end of the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus says, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” This world is made for the righteous and the unrighteous alike. This world is made for the holy ones and for *all of us* who are just struggling to get through the day.

The Dhammapada is taken from the sayings of the Buddha, and it echoes our Christian story of the prodigal, his dilemma, his struggle, and his final encounter with love. Listen to a brief passage.

We are what we think.
All that we are, arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with an impure mind
and trouble will follow you
as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

We are what we think.
All that we are, arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.

Speak or act with a pure mind
and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable.

“Look how he abused me and hurt me, how he threw me down and robbed me.”
Live with such thoughts... and you live in hate.

“Look how he abused me and hurt me, how he threw me down and robbed me.”
Abandon such thoughts... and live in love.

In this world hate never yet dispelled hate.
Only love dispels hate.
This is the law, ancient and inexhaustible.ⁱⁱ

Only love dispels hate. Indeed. This is the law, ancient and inexhaustible, and as challenging a teaching today as it ever was.

A few weeks back we had Brother Curtis Almquist from the Society of St. John the Evangelist speak at our forum. Curtis is one of the holiest people I have ever known, and I asked him a question I was curious about. After a lifetime of prayer, spiritual direction, retreats, and experience, what did he think most people missed on the spiritual journey? What don't people “get”?

And his answer was the very same answer I would have offered out of my own life's experience in ministry. We don't believe we are loved by God. We don't believe we deserve it. Other people around us might deserve it. But we don't believe we are worthy of it; and so we do not live into it fully, and we do not claim God's love completely, and we do not live the grace-filled lives to which we've been called.

Brother Curtis said it so gently, so empathetically, because, as he shared, he feels it himself. He knows where others are coming from because he, too—after a lifelong journey towards greater intimacy with God—has not fully lived into this transformative reality. D.W. Ford once said, “God is a God of infinite grace. The overriding fact for God is not where we start from to reach his presence, but are we starting?”ⁱⁱⁱ

That older son didn't completely feel his father's love either. That older son didn't feel his father's full acceptance. He didn't feel empowered to live his own life and his resentment just builds and builds and builds.

Bruno Bettelheim in his seminal work *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* writes, "...stories on the 'Two Brothers' themes add to (the) intended dialogue between id, ego, and superego, another dichotomy; the striving for independence and self-assertion, and the opposite tendency to remain safely home, tied to the parents. From the earliest version on, these stories stress that both desires reside in each of us, and that we cannot survive deprived of either: the wish to stay tied to the past, and the urge to reach out to a new future. Through the unfolding of events, the story most often teaches that entirely cutting oneself off from one's past leads to disaster, but that to exist only beholden to the past is stunting; while it is safe, it provides no life of one's own. Only the thorough integration of these contrary tendencies permits successful existence."^{iv}

That older son didn't feel his father's love and his resentment finally spills over. "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

For the first time, maybe in a very long time, the older son finally spoke his truth. It has been building inside him. He didn't think he was allowed to take a day off. He didn't think he was allowed to take a young goat so that he and his friends could have a feast. He was imprisoned by a sense of duty and obligation and order, and he's not unlike so many of us who need to hear the words his father offered to him. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." All the love I have. All the forgiveness I have. All the joy and peace and hope I have is yours! It's completely yours!

What's going on here? How *does* God work? "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead, and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

Perhaps we can celebrate our own liberation next.

Amen

ⁱ J. Ted Blakley, *A Lector's Guide & Commentary to The Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*, St Mark's Press, Wichita, 2009, p. 115-118

ⁱⁱ *Yr. C, Synthesis, Lent 4*, March 31, 2019, p. 4

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 4

^{iv} Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, c. 1977

©2022 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.
For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022