

March 31, 2019

The Sons – Older And Younger

Prayer

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts. And be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

The Gospel reading from this morning is one that is familiar to everybody I think. It's one of the most familiar readings that we have during the church year. It's often called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In more recent years, I've heard more and more people refer to it as the Parable of the Forgiving Father. I think that's a very appropriate title as well. But it has such a wide ranging appeal to people when they hear it. Even as I read it, sometimes I get a little emotional about the different emotions that are being shared within the parable. The love and compassion of father for son, even when the son has hurt the father. The anger that the elder son feels not only towards his brother but for his father for celebrating. So much in this parable.

However, when most of us hear that, I think we naturally gravitate towards the son who left. We would like to think of ourselves as that prodigal son. The one who maybe went astray but finally came to his senses, came home and was forgiven by the father, and a great celebration took place. But I have to be honest with you, in my time in the church, I have not met very many prodigal sons or daughters. I mean, if you really look at the son, the younger son, what did he do? He came to the father and said, "I want to treat you as if you are dead. I want my inheritance and I'm tired of waiting for it. I want to have my freedom. I want to live life on my own terms and I want you to give me the property that would come to me at the time of your death."

Now I don't know about you, but I don't know very many fathers who would say, "Oh, okay, sure. That's what you want. Let me pay for you to go and live life on your own terms." I don't quite get a clear picture of my father ever saying that to me. But this father says, "Okay, that's the freedom you think you want. You think that you are ready and prepared to live life on your own terms, that you don't need family, that you don't need the resources that have been given to you all your life. Okay, now's the time for you to learn."

And so he gives him what he wants. God gives us what we think we want, what humanity demands. Freedom. We want to choose, we want to be on our own. Well, his choice was to leave the father and to leave the brother, to go out on his own. And he doesn't do a very good job. He ends up poor, and he ends up in a country that's foreign and he ends up with a job that doesn't give him enough to really feed him. And then we have that great line. He came to himself. He remembered who he was. He remembered what life was like before, and he knew that he had no right to go back to the father and say, "I want to have that relationship again. I want that back."

But he did know enough to think that he could come back to the father and say, "I know I'm not worthy to be called your son. But if you would just treat me like a hired hand, if you would just take me back and allow me to work for you, life could be better." How many people do you know that have had that kind of relationship with God where they say, "God, I don't want anything to do with you at all. Period. I want to do it on my own. I'm going to go out and I'm going to live life the way I want to live life. Not caring about your statutes, what you've said, your commandments, none of it."

And then find their way back. One, I don't know too many people who have ever said, "I don't want anything to do with God, period." And of the few people that I did, most of them never really came back. They died in their brokenness. So I don't know many prodigal sons or daughters. What I do know is churches full of older brothers. The older brother who sees the person that goes astray and can judge them in a heartbeat. Who can see them even though they don't travel to a distant country, but it's easy to identify their sin and it's not my sin, so it's easy for me to say yours is worse. It's easy for me to say, "I don't know how you could even live that way. How you can see life that way. How you can see relationships that way."

And the truth of the matter is, I know that there are people that see me and they say, "How in the world can he call himself a priest? I know that he doesn't do this or I know that he does do that." Don't expect any elaboration on that. But they will judge because my sin is a little different from their sin. And it doesn't matter what sin it is, doesn't matter if it's adultery, idolatry, stealing, any of the thou shalt nots. We see others and we judge them. I'm doing better than they are. I'm living life like I think God wants me to live life, but they aren't living life the way I think they ought to live life.

Isn't that what the older brother is really saying? "How in the world, Dad, can you receive this and celebrate this son of yours when he's taken your property, he spent it on prostitutes." Now how he knew that, I don't know. "And now he's come back and you're celebrating. And I've been out here working in the fields all this time before this dumb son came along. After he left, I've been here. I've been doing all the labor, all the things that you want me to do. I've been working like a slave for you, and you never even gave me a goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But this son of yours comes back and you celebrate."

What does the father say? He said, "Son, you're always with me. You always have been. Obviously you've resented it." My words, not Jesus. But now this son, it would have been nice if he said your brother. Your brother was dead, completely separated from us. Didn't know whether he was alive or dead. He was dead to us. And now he's alive again. He's here. He was lost and he's been found. We have to celebrate. He begs, begs his son to come in and join the party.

See, I think we are whole lot more like the elder son than the younger son. And I think that's part of what, and a big part of what Jesus was trying to get across in this parable. How does it start? Pharisees, the scribes see him and the tax collectors and the other sinners, the ones that they can label very easily, are coming to him and they're grumbling about it. Why does he allow these tax collector sinners to come and be with him?

And when Jesus hears the questions, this is the story he tells. He has two points. One is God is forgiving. The whole purpose of Jesus coming into the world is to announce a forgiveness that goes beyond anything that the world has known before. The forgiveness of sins that allows us to be reconciled to God, that allows us to receive salvation. Not because we have lived up to everything that God has ever wanted us to do or to fulfill the law, but because God loves us so much. He wants us to be there, wants to be with us, wants us to be with Him.

But the other part of the parable, that's the father forgiving the prodigal, the younger son. But the other is he goes out, he wants the two sons to be reconciled, wants them to recognize that part of this forgiveness thing is not just about father to child, it's about child to child. It's about us not looking at one another and judging one another and say you're not worthy of forgiveness. It's not about us seeing someone that we know is not living the kind of life that I would live or I think we should live or someone

in the church said we should live. And therefore I'm not going to celebrate that they have come back to church. I'm not going to celebrate that they have come back and to be a part of the congregation. I'm not going to celebrate that they have turned their life around, even though they had been lost. I don't approve, therefore I'm not going to celebrate. I'm not going to reconcile. I'm not going to be a part of that. Not going to let them think that it was okay.

That's not what it's about. It's about us being reconciled and us forgiving one another because we recognize that we're all prodigals to a certain extent. We've all gone astray, we've all tried to come back. We all need the forgiveness of God. We all need to be forgiven by one another because whether intentionally or unintentionally, we have this tendency to hurt one another, to say the wrong things, to do the wrong things, to not do the right things. And this is a call for us to recognize our imperfections and yet our ability through the love of God to forgive and reconcile with one another. To not be the elder son. And he says, no, not gonna do it. Can't agree, can't approve, not putting my stamp of approval on it.

Well, guess what? God doesn't need your stamp of approval on it. But God does want you to make an effort to forgive, to be reconciled, to recognize that someone who was lost has been found. Someone who was considered dead because of the choices they have made finally came to themselves and came back. That God forgives them, and that God wants us to forgive them as well. May we recognize the great love of God which sees us as sons and daughters. Who has compassion on us, even though we have made choices that have left the father behind. And yet when we come to ourselves, we come back and God's eyes are filled with compassion. God's arms reach out to enfold us, to celebrate that we are His children. And to remember that as one child of God comes back to the father, is welcomed and celebrated. That we too are called to be reconciled. To forgive. And to celebrate the lost who is now found.

Gregory Hein – Rector