

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
March 31, 2019  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joshua 4:19-5:12  
Psalm 34:1-8  
2 Corinthians 5:17-21  
Luke 15:11-32

In past years, I have preached on this day from Jesus' parable about the Father with two sons, examining it from several different angles. But I feel compelled to take another shot at it this morning, because this story has the capacity to speak to us in multiple ways. This story of the Waiting Father is the story both of *Israel* and of the *human race*. It is also the story of *every believer*.

And that is just the beginning!

I want to approach the parable from yet another angle today, and if possible, to connect it with our other scripture lessons and our Lenten journey.

This parable is the third in a series of stories Jesus tells in Luke chapter 15. The immediate context involves the Pharisees and teachers of the Law voicing a serious complaint: *That Jesus welcomes sinners and even eats with them*.

This is very similar to an event in the book of Acts (also written by Luke) where Jewish disciples strongly objected when Peter sat down and ate with Gentiles. (Acts 11:2-3).

Given this context, the ancient Church Father Augustine and many others came to see the Parable of the Prodigal Son as an illustration of God's plan of salvation with respect to Jews and Gentiles.

For Augustine and others, the older son in the parable represents *Israel*, and the younger son represents the *Gentiles*. There are details in the story that make this conclusion plausible. The *younger* son moves to a far country, where he does not observe the Law, and ends up caring for pigs.

As for the older brother, his stubborn refusal to go into the party is seen as an illustration of St. Paul's words in Romans 11, where Paul says: "A hardening has come upon Israel, in part, until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and thus all Israel will be saved." (Rom. 11:25-26)

I like how scripture scholar Eugene Peterson renders these verses from Paul: *This hardness on the part of insider Israel toward God is temporary. Its effect is to open things up to all the outsiders so that we end up with a full house. Before it's all over, there will be a complete Israel.*

The parable's historical context, then, seems to show that Jesus tells this story to show God's radical love and mercy toward folks like us, toward outsiders. The younger son's transformation – especially his being dead but coming to life again – is the very way St. Paul describes the Gentiles in Ephesians:

*You were dead in your transgressions and sins...but God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ.* (Eph. 2:1-5)

Now, as I said at the beginning, this parable speaks to us on many levels. In addition to what I've just shared, the parable addresses us all at a more *personal* level as well.

In baptism, we are given a divine birthright and made a "new creation," as Paul puts it in today's epistle. But when we sin, we're like the younger son in the story. We quit our Father's house, we head off into the far country, and we squander our inheritance by trying to live without the Father.

Lost in sin, we cut ourselves off from the grace of sonship lavished upon us in baptism. We are spiritually "dead" in our trespasses and sins. It is still possible for us to come to our senses and make our way back to the Father. But only the Father can free us from the slavery to sin that causes us (like the younger son) to see God not as our *Father* but as our Master, One we serve as *slaves*.

In this regard, notice the behavior of the older brother. In his anger, he speaks to his Father not as if he were his son, but his *servant*. He says: "All these years I served you," or "slaved for you." He never calls him "Father," as his younger brother does.

And he does not even acknowledge the younger son as his brother. He refers to him instead as "this son of yours." And so, without leaving home, the older brother is *just as much in the far country as his brother*, because he has been defining his relationship with his Father as one who is a *servant* and not a *son*.

But God does not want slaves. God wants *children*. Like the Father in the parable, God longs to call each of us “my son, my daughter.” God longs to share his life with us, to tell us: “Everything I have is yours.”

Then, reconciled like Israel in our Old Testament lesson, we can take our place at the Table of the Eucharist, the homecoming banquet the Father prepares for His lost sons and daughters, the new Passover we celebrate this side of heaven. We taste and see the goodness of the Lord, as we sing in today’s Psalm, rejoicing that we who were dead are found alive again.

So come with faith. Come with gratitude for the Father’s love and mercy generously offered to us at all times, even when we are off in the far country.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.