

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 10, 2013
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joshua 4:24-5:12
Psalm 34:1-8
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Luke 15:11-32

Ralph Waldo Emerson once called the parable told by Jesus this morning “the greatest story in the Bible, or *out* of it.” Charles Dickens agreed with Emerson’s assessment. It is, in the minds of many, Jesus’ greatest parable.

One of the reasons for that, I believe, is that we can all identify with its characters. Who of us has not at one point in your life felt like the *younger* son? Who of us has not been eager to get away, then pummeled and abused by our mistakes, to the point where we’d be willing to do almost anything to get back to our “old life?”

Each of us has at some point in life also felt like the *older* brother. We are hard working. We are diligent. We follow the rules. We tow the line. We play fairly and we expect fairness from others. And so we resent it when we see the undeserved gain or the unpunished wastefulness of others.

And some of you know what it’s like to be in the *Father’s* shoes. You know the desperate feelings of missing a loved one, perhaps not knowing where they are for long periods of time, and you know what it feels like when they unexpectedly return.

Jesus' parables are not like Aesop's fables. They do not just make moralistic "points." Jesus' parables are lived experience. They open windows into a new land, into a new way of being.

This story begins, "There was a father who had two sons." The younger son is impatient and wants his share of his father's estate before his father dies, so he asks him for it.

According to Jewish law, a father with two sons was to leave 2/3 of his estate to the older son and 1/3 to the younger. The father in this case was no doubt deeply hurt by the younger son's demand, because in order to give him what he wants, it's more than just going down to the bank and making a withdrawal. Most of the Father's wealth would have been in his land and his livestock. Granting this request would necessitate selling most of his livestock and liquidating his other assets in order to give his son his share of the estate.

But it's not just the material things that grieve the Father's heart here. In this culture, the younger son's request here is about more than him saying to his father, "show me the money."

New Testament scholar Kenneth Baily explains:

For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life, from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of the son's request for his inheritance while [his] father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same. The conversation Runs as follows:

Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?

Never!

Could anyone ever make such a request?

Impossible!

If anyone ever did, what would happen?

His father would beat him, of course!

Why?

*The request means **he wants his father to die**.* (Henry Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p. 35.)

Yet, the father honors his son's request, and he departs for the far country.

He's got money to burn, and there are casinos, bars, and strip joints waiting to help him burn it.

And burn it he does. He revels in his newfound freedom. He enjoys all the hedonistic pleasures his money can buy him.

And then one day he wakes up from a four-alarm hangover, and he realizes that he's tapped out. His friends are nowhere to be found. He's got no job, no money, no friends, no support. He's been getting a great kick out of life. But now life is kicking back.

He becomes so desperate that he begs a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs, because the pods from the carob tree used to feed the pigs actually look good to him.

Finally, the day comes when this young man hits bottom. He thinks to himself, “I’m sitting here in this pigpen starving to death. Back home, even the hired hands have plenty to eat. Something’s wrong with this picture.”

As he continues his conversation with himself, he says, “I’m going to go back home to my father and see if he’ll take me on as a hired man.”

And so he takes that first step toward the long journey home.

Now let’s step out of the story for just a moment, back to the “real” world. In the real world, the world in which you and I live, how would the story unfold from here? What kind of ending to the story would you write? How would those listening to Jesus’ story expect it to end?

Actually, there was a similar story to this parable that circulated among Jewish rabbis many years before Jesus told it. In that version, the son returns home to the father, who is waiting *with his arms crossed*. When the son seeks the father’s forgiveness, the father sternly replies, “Forget it! You had your chance. You’ve chosen to live like a pig, no go back to your pigs. You’ve made your bed, now lie in it!”

And in this version, the elder son would no doubt give a hearty “amen” to his father’s harsh words. Let the prodigal return, but to a meal of bread and water, not to a lavish Texas style barbecue!

Let the prodigal return, but let him wear sackcloth, not a new robe!

Let the prodigal return, but let him wear ashes, not a new ring for his finger!

Let the prodigal return, but let him return in tears, not in merriment.

And there may even be a few elder sons who would quote this passage from the Old Testament:

Suppose a man has a stubborn, rebellious son who will not obey his father or mother, even though they discipline him. In such cases, the father and mother must take the son before the leaders of the town. They must declare: "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious and refuses to obey. He is a worthless drunkard." Then all the men of the town must stone him to death. [Deut. 21:18-21]

The elder son may not want his younger brother dead, but he is also not in favor of an extravagant party. For he lives in the *real* world. In the real world, we have to count and keep track of things. In the real world, we don't know the value of anything unless we count, measure, and evaluate it. In the real world, we need to keep count, otherwise we lose track of what we *owe* each other and nothing has any value at all. In the real world, we keep track, otherwise fairness goes out the window.

Now, let's leave the "real" world and step back into the world of the story. We have a son who has broken his father's heart. No doubt every day the son has been gone, his father has wondered where he was and what he was doing.

I can picture this father, each afternoon at sundown, walking to the edge of his property and standing there alone, gazing out onto the horizon, wondering if he will ever see his son again.

Then, one afternoon as he stands at the edge of his property, he sees a hunched figure dragging slowly up the road. A glimmer of hope flickers through his mind, but it can't be his son because his son always had a spring in his step and always held his head high. And besides, this person walking along the road is dressed in rags. His son was always well-dressed.

But as he continues to look, something about the figure looks familiar to him. In a flash of insight, he realizes it *is* his son.

He jumps the stone fence where he is standing, and takes off running in a full sprint toward his son.

Now in Jewish culture, men wore long robes. In order for a man to run, he would have to lift the hem of his robe and hold it high to his knee to keep from tripping over it. If he did this, it would expose his bare legs, which was considered highly embarrassing. Men of respect *never* ran. It was undignified.

But not *this* man. He doesn't wait for his son to reach him. He throws caution and decorum to the wind, and runs like the wind to embrace *him*. He throws his arms around him, and he kisses him. The Greek verb here indicates continual action, a virtual smothering of his son with kisses.

As they embrace, the son says, "Dad, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I'm sorry. I'm not worthy to be called your son."

And his father interrupts him and tells the servants to get a robe and a ring and some sandals, and to kill the fattened calf so that they can celebrate.

And the party begins.

I know what you're thinking. The world we inhabit, this *fallen* world, doesn't work that way. In this fallen world we *need* to keep track and measure and count and remember. That's how things work. I understand that.

But there is one important domain in life where this isn't true. It's not true of *relationships*. In relationships, if you start counting, if you start keeping track of the right and wrong, the good and the bad, you'll drive yourself insane. You'll never get over it. In your attempt at relentless counting, you will collapse under the weight of your own protests, as you mutter: "All these years....you never.....this son of yours!"

We live in the real world. I know. But wouldn't it be something if there was a world that feels and tastes and smells differently?

Wouldn't it be something if there was a world where there was no dredging up past wrongs and unsettled scores?

Wouldn't it be something if there was a world where there was no counting of grievances?

Wouldn't it be something if there was a world where it is more important to be in *relationship* than to be *right*?

Wouldn't it be something if we could live in a world so full of unmerited grace that it would drive the counters and ledger-keepers absolutely crazy?

Wouldn't it be something to experience a world like that?

Well, guess what?

We just did.....

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