

March 27, 2022/ Fourth Lent

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“Repairing Relationship”

As we begin our consideration of today’s text, I suspect we do not know just how hard this will be. This is a text *we think we know*. And each time we hear it – what *we thought it meant* is hardened in our mind. We don’t think there is anything left for us to learn. And yet, we should probably be taking multiple weeks to explore it. It is that important and that rich in depth and meaning.

This is my favorite text in the Bible – which means *I must work harder* when preparing for this day - just as you work harder listening. We have been taught to refer to this text – *most unhelpfully* – as the parable of “*The Prodigal Son*.” That experience alone misleads us. This is not the parable of the prodigal son – it is the parable of *the waiting father*. How typical of us to look at a passage and make it about us instead of about God. Do you see the word “Prodigal” in the text? No – but our story does begin, “**There was a man who had two sons.**” It is his story – and he is the father who waits.

I told you how much I love this passage. I have been told over the years by good and faithful people that they hate it. They hate it because having made sacrifices to be responsible as God’s children – **it feels as if Jesus is giving away the store in this story**. “After all,” they say, “*the prodigal gets what he wants, and the responsible older brother gets the short end of the stick.*” This perception is one casualty of calling the parable by the wrong name.

Of course, we are dealing with *two very different brothers* – and it is easier to identify the transgressions of the younger brother. Let’s call him the “*hot sinner*.” Whatever his sins in the far land, they pale in comparison to his sins at home. What he did at the beginning of the story is so egregious – so awful – that by the time he goes to the far country **he is dead to us**. *We don’t feel compassion for the selfish short-sighted runt of the litter*. What do we say in our culture? “**You made your bed – now lie in it.**” Lucky for that boy, his father cares about him more than we do. I believe Jesus original audience received this story more like we do than as Jesus offered it. Telling your dad you would be just as happy if he were dead so you can have his money fails spectacularly.

So, we know the young man is out of relationship with his father and doesn’t understand how to build that relationship. What we often miss is that his older

brother is no better. He is different – but no better. Let's call him the "*cold sinner*." We find it easier to forgive the cold sinner. He is, after all, more like us. The younger son's rebellion is obvious and outrageous. The older brother is no less out of relationship but is camouflaged. He keeps up appearances - doing what he is told and begrudging every chore. Perhaps secretly happy to not have competition at home when his brother leaves. If we listen to his complaining at the end of the story – *this is no son who loves and understands his father* – he is a resentful boy with a chip on his shoulder and a cold heart.

We do not have the story of a son who is out of relationship with his father. We have a story of a loving father with two sons who do not know how to *accept and revel* in that love. Two sons – each more deeply understood if they are more like us. But focusing on those boys we might miss the heart of the matter.

Why did Jesus tell this story? Because he was *welcoming tax collectors* who had betrayed and cheated their countryman, *women* who sold their bodies for money and people who *could care less* about leading a good religious life. The very people ***everyone in town felt superior to*** were having dinner with the miracle worker from Nazareth and it was mind bending.

This story catches us unaware because we listen to it *happy to pass judgement* on those in it. And the reason it is told at all is *to answer those happy to pass judgement on other people*. **At the end, the older brother stands outside the party – and we don't know what he does.** Jesus is inviting us to answer. Will we go into God's party even though it seems God could have used some help with the guest list? Or will we stay outside *because if God can love the people we don't* – well – then we can't give allegiance to God.

In the end, friends, our story, and our lives are not about the kind of wrongdoing and distance from God– nor whether the hot or cold sinners are actually better than the other. What counts – in every situation, today and always, is God's life running through town holding up his skirts or standing on the edge of the party pleading - *to repair relationship*: between us and our father; Between us and our brothers and sisters – even those we don't like. God's surprising life in our world is all about repairing relationship. ***Let's be part of that story.*** After all, our father is waiting for us.