

The Reverend Beth Lind Foote
4th Sunday in Lent, Year C
March 10, 2013
Psalm 32: 1-8
2nd Corinthians 5: 15-21
Luke 15: 1-3, 11B-32

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be
always acceptable in your sight, our Lord and our Redeemer.
Amen.*

We have a shelf full of these Gold Boxes in our Godly Play rooms. They're special boxes for the Parable Stories. There's one for each parable, and they contain storytelling materials, but the box the Gold Box itself tells part of the story; The Gold Box symbolizes the mysterious quality of Parables. Parables are stories Jesus told whose shape is always changing, like a Parabola. They are open-ended, but sometimes their meaning is even closed to us. We start a Parable session in Godly Play by knocking on the box. Today you and I are going to knock on a special Gold Box with the Parable of the Prodigal Son inside. Special because it's not one of the Godly Play stories. It is a very grown-up story. You have to have lived a little to be able to knock on this box.

The Pharisees and the scribes are “grumbling” about Jesus’ relationship with the tax collectors and sinners, and so Jesus tells them this story.

We meet two sons. The younger son behaves badly by asking for his inheritance before his father has died. This was scandalous in Jesus’ culture, because it meant that you wished your parent was dead, and wealth was held in the land, and herds, which was not easily liquidated. The younger son takes his money and goes off to a distant country, outside the boundaries of the Jewish world, and spends all the capital on “dissolute living.” The King James translation does a better job, calling it: “riotous living.” Things go from bad to worse, and he hits bottom when he finds himself in the Kosher nightmare of living with pigs. He is as “unclean” as anyone can be. There in the pigsty, the younger son is so full of shame he feels unworthy of being his father’s son anymore. Perhaps that is

the point at which we can most relate to the younger son. When we feel shame hollowing out our souls.

Meanwhile, back on the family farm, the elder son is such a typical first child! He behaves as he should behave. He follows the rules, works hard for the family farm, and asks for nothing. He expects others to do the same. In Jesus' time, the elder son's reputation was probably tarnished by the way his younger brother acted, and I can imagine that he continued to be angry with him for shaming the family.

We know what the moral of the story would be in a "normal" fable: if you follow the rules, you will do well, and if you go off to Vegas and put your IRA on the roulette wheel, then you're going to end up in the pigsty.

But this is no normal story. It's a Parable. Parables invite us to enter into the story and identify with the characters. When have you been the Prodigal Son? When have you been the Elder Son? Have you ever been the Father?

Back in the pigsty, Jesus uses the wonderful phrase, "he came to himself." It's not clear whether he is truly sorry or not. Our inner elder son wants him to feel really sorry. Jesus he is "in need," and "dying of hunger." Like they say in Twelve Step programs, he realizes that life has become "unmanageable" and turns towards home.

The Father has been on the lookout for his lost son. When he sees him, the Father, RUNS to meet him, hugs and kisses him!

He doesn't let his son grovel, because he IS his SON. This is not what the younger son expected. This is not normal patriarchal behavior. The father restores the son to his former status in a burst

of pure celebration because “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

What about the elder son? He plays the role of conventional society. He grumbles about his brother’s behavior. He is thinking primarily of himself, and how he’s been hurt, not how his beloved brother has returned to the family. Though the Parable has an open ending, we’re left with the scene outside the party with music in the background. The elder son refuses to come in even though the father tries to meet HIM on HIS road, and pleads with him to join the celebration. He chooses NOT to forgive his younger brother and his generous father. God allows us that freedom.

Which character are you this Lent? We may find ourselves, like the younger son, to be lost in a distant country and wondering, “how did I get here?” We may be desperately hungry for connection and forgiveness.

We may be like the Elder Son, who is also lost, but in a wasteland of pride. We may be so attached to being “right” or “reasonable” and “good” that we can’t allow ourselves to forgive.

The Parable makes us consider, “how good does God need us to be? And is being “good” really the point?” Sometimes we have to choose between being “right” and “good” and “on the right track,” and being in relationship with someone. That’s what the father does in the story. We need to go out on the road, and meet that beloved person where they are, whether its pretty or not. We need to see the person not their sins or mistakes, and extend our love.

Jesus is saying that love is a bit like a Parable. It’s infinitely mysterious, and its shape is always changing. Love is open-ended.

The father looks beyond the younger sons faults to the person he loves, and loves him in an open-ended way. This is often difficult. I think of the woman I know who moved across the country to live with her parents with Alzheimers on the East Coast. I’m in awe of

her capacity for open-ended loving. She does not need to change them or make them “better” to love them. She loves them. I think of my friends with teenage sons on the Autism spectrum. They have come to the place where they do not need to change them or even understand them. They love their sons. I’m in awe of their capacity for open-ended loving.

The word Prodigal means “given to reckless extravagance, lavish, giving abundantly.” The younger son spent prodigally, but the father loved prodigally. He celebrates his son’s movement from death to life, from being lost to being found. That is what we are called to do---be prodigal in our love as God loves us. Paul writes in Corinthians today that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

When we can be instruments of God's love, we too can practice reconciliation. But to do that, we have to turn towards home ourselves, and allow the Father to meet us on the road of our lives.

This Lent, we are using the symbol of the bucket to empty ourselves of what separates us from God, and fill ourselves with what brings us closer to God.

I'm finding that, like the elder son, I often want to limit God to fit my criteria. I want to tell God whom to love and who deserves love. This is exactly why Jesus tells the Parable to the Pharisees and Scribes: to show them that God can love whomever God loves, and people I don't much like or respect or feel comfortable around. They might even be tax collectors or sinners. And, for many of us, it's hard to accept that God may even love us. But it's true. God loves each one of us here today. Let's not be like the elder son and miss out on the party.

Let's empty ourselves of judgment and open ourselves to God's exuberant embrace so that we can embrace others. We really don't have to be so good. God is running to meet us on the road here today in a beautiful meal of thanksgiving and celebration. Come in to the party, as you are; come in from the field, or the pigsty. You were lost, and now you're found. Amen.

