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Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 14, 2010

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Texts: Joshua 5.9-12
 Psalm 32
 2 Corinthians 5.16-21
 Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

I don't know how you respond to people's accusations but I sure wish I could master the art of how Jesus responds. This story of the Prodigal Son, as we call it, is the last of three parables Jesus tells in response to the accusation that begins our text today. The Pharisees and Scribes were grumbling how "this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." We have a habit of depicting the Scribes and Pharisees as self-righteous and petty but I want to take a moment to step back from that typical caricature. Pharisees take very seriously the responsibility they hold as leaders of God's people. They respect their Creator and do everything in their power to avoid the ways of life that offend God. They take seriously the consequence of sin and they wondered whether Jesus did. If he could welcome sinners and eat with them, wasn't he essentially saying that sin is no big deal or that honoring God is unimportant? The fact that Jesus offers three stories to them – the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son - some of the most eloquent stories Jesus ever told – shows how seriously Jesus takes their concern.

I want to begin with the younger son, the one we know as the Prodigal. The end of his story is so compelling. In his homecoming we see the grace and unconditional love of God that we all long for. Our attention is drawn to the joy filled reception when the prodigal returns but underneath that happy ending, in fact the reason for its occurrence, is this vast back story of heartache and shame and guilt. Gordon and I have joked about western Michigan being a wonderful place to return home to raise a family – meaning it's a wonderful place if you first get to leave for a while before coming back. That is certainly not true for everyone, but a lot people move through that rite of passage of needing to leave home and make your own way in the world.

There's more going on in this story than a simple rite of passage. The younger son asks for his inheritance while his father was still living – it is tantamount to wishing him dead. The rupture of their relationship was painful enough. But then there is the shame that would be attached to both of them; to the son for making such a disrespectful and outrageous demand and to the father for responding in such a weak and indulgent manner. We don't really know why this young man felt the need to leave – what impulse pushed him to strike out on his own. I've come to appreciate more and more over the years how Henri Nouwen in his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, has characterized those voices that beckon us to leave home and travel into the distant country. Nouwen talks about it in terms of whose voice we listen to.

As I was reading Luke again I was reminded of how frequently Jesus frames discipleship in terms of listening: those who have ears to hear, listen to my voice. It's when we stop listening to the voice of God that we feel ourselves drawn to the distant country. The voices of the world (even the voices of the religious world in many cases) tell us that we need to prove ourselves before we will be loved or that our worth is determined by what we do and the measure of our success. When we believe that our worth is attached to what we do, a whole downward spiral begins. This is where Nouwen's description gets so real and starts hitting so close to home:

- we start looking for ways to impress people
- we notice when people ignore us or fail to give us praise or offer the slightest bit of criticism
- we start watching for other people's mistakes and we keep track of how are we doing compared to how they are doing

When you start paying attention to what runs through your mind on a given day - how much space is taken up by these mental games – it's shocking.

What happens when you live in this way is that eventually it all unravels; the exhilaration of your imagined success wears off or sheer exhaustion catches up with you. The son finds himself alone, penniless, and desperate until he remembers home. I love the phrase Jesus uses here “when he came back to himself.” He comes back to himself as he remembers what it was like at the home he left behind. He decides to return there. It's significant

to note that his initial turning back toward home isn't grounded in some dramatic heart wrenching confession. He's actually quite calculating about what he will say and what he hopes to get from that confession. The attitude that takes this young son home is not the substance the happy reunion will be made of; that will come from the father and not from the son.

So let's turn to the father, who is the real center of this story. I said before that we regularly refer to this as the story of the prodigal son, but as the folks who gathered for Bible study on Wednesday night pointed out, the term prodigal means rashly extravagant or abundant. It is as accurate a description of the father's love as it is the son's rebellion.

From beginning to end this story showcases the generosity of spirit – the goodness of heart – the watchful, hopeful anticipation of this father's love. Even his willingness to give to his son his inheritance reveals how deeply committed this father is to his son's freedom. It's not an inheritance that the son deserves; certainly not while his father is alive and frankly as a second son he's not entitled to it at all. He does it with the foresight that parents often have for the suffering their children walk into with the choices that they make. He loves him enough to let him go and enough to fall all over him when he dares to return. There is no reprimand, lecture, or "I told you so" in sight. Not a single condition is placed upon his return. In fact, while he is still far off, his father runs out to him, throws his arms around him and kisses him, calls a servant to bring the finest robe and the family ring. There would be no second class status for this wayward son, no probation, no demands to prove himself worthy. The father grants to his son what Paul talked about in 2 Corinthians today: the chance to be a new creation - to let the past be over and the future open. He was lost and but now he was found....it was time to celebrate.

This is why Jesus eats with sinners, because he refuses to look at people from that human point of view that defines people by their past mistakes. He sees them as they are and can become. Jesus' way of being with people reminds of a saying by the Sufi poet Rumi: out beyond right and wrong there is a field, I will meet you there.

But that is not the end of the story. Jesus has one more caveat to reveal. It's

the part of the story that speaks most directly to those of us who like the Pharisees and Scribes have stayed a little closer to home than the more adventurous prodigals among us. I always assume that in church circles there are a fair number of elder sons in the room. The elder son – the oldest child – they are the ones who never leaves. They are the ones who by all appearances are faithful and devout; who know the values of the household and honors them – who understand the work required in maintaining that household and do more than their fare share. They are the ones who stay close to home.

But as Gordon pointed out to us last week, nearness is not so much about proximity as it is about relationship. This son who stays near his father is in many ways just as lost as the one who leaves. He is ruled by the very same line of thinking as the younger son. Listen to what he says in the midst of his anger. His virtue has become a source of bitter complaint. He was doing those things to make a name from himself, hoping to be rewarded and acknowledged. He was caught up in the same game his brother was playing: trying to prove himself. He wasn't any closer to his father than was his younger brother. Both of these sons were filled with exhaustion and despair. One is overwhelmed by his guilt and the other by his sense of entitlement; neither of them understanding the love and the grace of their father.

This is our story...Jesus gives it to us to do what all good stories do: to work on us – to evoke our imagination. The part of the story that won't let us go will chart the territory of our response.

Maybe your hearing is sharpened today and you realize it is the voices of the distant country that have been driving you, and it is time to tune in to a different voice.

Or maybe you heard yourself in the bitter resentment of the elder son today and it's time to be honest about that and recognize what it means about your own sense of belonging....what really motivates your life of faith.

For you it may be the image of the open-hearted, unconditional embrace the father offered to both of his wayward sons, and you know it is pushing you to re-examine the limits you have put on the forgiveness you offer.

Or maybe it's the laughter echoing from the party that stimulates your imagination today. What is like to think of home as a place where parties are thrown on a moment's notice or to think of laughter and loud music as the identifying sound for the household of God.

Where does this story spark something in you? That's the place to go.

This is our story. This is God's story. Thanks be to God!