

A Man had Two Sons

A Sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church

Toronto, Ontario

Fourth Sunday of Lent; March 14, 2010

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

The parable of the prodigal and his brother is one of the most famous stories in all of scripture. But like all stories in scripture we need to read it with the eyes of a first century person before we can understand it fully. First, we need to know that when the younger son asks his father for his inheritance, he was saying that he wanted his father to be dead, and he wanted to leave the family forever. So when the father forgave him and accepted him back into the family, the people listening to Jesus tell this story would be deeply shocked and offended. Jaws would drop; people would mutter against the father for not holding up the honour of the family by throwing the son out of the house, which, by the way, was essentially a sentence of death for the son as he no longer had any resources at all. In Jesus' day, the father could do whatever he liked with his money when he was alive, and at his death, his property would be divided between the sons with the older son getting two-thirds of the estate and the younger son, the remaining one-third. If the father decided to distribute his wealth before his death, then the two sons would be obligated to take look after the father and the rest of the family for the remainder of their lives. This is what the older son did. He remained at home, he worked for his father "like a slave" according to his speech at the end of the story. The younger son broke this sacred obligation. He did nothing to care for the father, but left home and spent his inheritance on himself. In doing this he lost all his rights as a son. It would be expected that his father would reject him and send him away to die. We know of course that the father does nothing of the sort. He welcomes the lost son with open arms. When he gives him "the best robe" it would be the father's own robe. The signet ring was a sign of restored authority and responsibility. Shoes on his feet was a sign that he was a son again and not a slave; and the killing of the fatted calf was a sign that the whole community was welcomed to the feast that would celebrate his homecoming. It was a shocking, outrageous thing to do.

Secondly, ancient people listening to the story would have identified with the older son, the one who stayed home. People would have thought that he had every right to complain about what the father had done. It violated all the rules of society. And yet, Jesus was teaching that these were the ways of God. This is what life would be like in the Kingdom of God, which Jesus had come to proclaim.

As church goers we see also identify with the older brother, the one who stayed home, the one who was faithful. But in this story, the father seems to take us for granted. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." I don't have to worry about you; you show up for work every day; you pay your taxes on time; you are a good citizen; I can count on you, and therefore I don't have to pay any attention to you. And we are tempted to say, "Thanks for nothing, Dad. It may well be that everything you have will eventually come to me, but your other son, my brother, is spending it as if there is no tomorrow. And while your fortune may last for your lifetime, it won't be around for me and my kids if you let my younger brother continue to waste it. You are spoiling him, Dad; you always have. He's your favourite despite all that I have tried to do to please you. It isn't fair." We would feel a little better about this story if the prodigal son had to make some kind of restitution for wasting the family inheritance the way that he has. Perhaps he would never be able to repay all that he has lost, but to just welcome him back with open arms, kill the fatted calf and throw a party doesn't seem right. If the father is supposed to be God in this story, then we can see God's grace very clearly, but where is God's justice? Doesn't the older brother have a real grievance here?

This is the main stumbling block in this parable that has troubled people for thousands of years. And because of this troublesome issue, we tend to skip over it and ignore it as much as we can. And so we ignore the older brother altogether and focus only on the prodigal and his father. We condemn the wickedness of the prodigal and applaud the long-suffering love of the father. We comfort ourselves with the thought that if we ever turn out to be the prodigal son then forgiveness is readily available. All we have to do come to our senses, repent, which literally means to turn around and return home. And we push the problems raised by the elder son into the background. Some commentators have suggested that the older son is being self-righteous. Perhaps he isn't as loyal or as good as he claims to be or as the father believes him to be. Nobody's perfect after all. The problem is that there isn't a whiff of a suggestion in that actual story that the elder son isn't exactly what he appears to be: diligent, hard-working, loyal, dependable. And despite these admirable qualities the father focuses on his ne'er-do-well younger brother and rejoices when he repents and returns home. There is no suggestion that the father ever condemns the younger brother. He gives him his inheritance even when he probably knew what might happen. The suggestion seems to be that the older brother's virtues are their own reward, and the older brother has nothing to complain about. Church people don't like this very much. We want our good deeds to be recognized and rewarded. Otherwise, why come to church at all? This story bothers us because we relate to the older brother who seems to get the short end of the stick. So even as we try to push the objections of the older brother into the background, they don't easily go away. The stumbling block of the older brother's complaints remain.

In his speech to his father the older son clearly expected his brother to be condemned and dis-inherited from any benefits as a son. Surely this would have been a just response; surely, the condemnation of the irresponsibility of the younger son is what God's justice must be like. The younger son had broken every tradition and standard of his society. And yet, the father welcomed him back and restored him to his former position.

When the older son complains, the father points out that "all that is mine is yours", this is more than a sentimental statement, it is an actual fact. Remember that the father divided his property between his two sons before his death, which would leave him dependant on them for the rest of his life. The younger son's inheritance is gone. All that is left of the father's wealth now resides with the older son. What more can the father give his older son when everything has already been given to him. Of course, the older son wants his brother to be punished by their father, to be rejected and sent away, to remain dead as a member of the family. By restoring him to his place as his son, the father raises the younger son back up to the level of the older son; they will all live together again as a family: "this brother of yours was lost and has been found." The older son, who has possession of the entire family fortune, is now required to look after his brother as a member of the family. The father cannot take back his estate once he has divided it, and the older son cannot turn his back on a member of his family recognized as such by the father.

We don't know how the story ends. No doubt the younger brother had his work cut out for him as he re-integrated himself back into the family. There would be many long conversations between the two brothers before the family tie would be re-established, but the father has opened the door for that reconciliation to happen. Eventually, the father would die and the sons would have to work together. Unless the younger son disgraces the family again, the older brother must accept his father's wish that the younger son's right be restored to him. Both brothers would have to work hard to keep the family together. The younger brother must become like his brother, and the older brother must become like his father and forgive.

There are so many levels to this story, but if I had to pick one to highlight it would be need to forgive and the need to withhold our instinct to be judgmental. Too often we in the church stand in judgement of one another not to mention the rest of society. We in the United Church often pride ourselves on our social conscience, which is

what following Jesus is all about. We stand up for the downtrodden, the disadvantaged and the dispossessed. At the same time though, standing up for the downtrodden can quickly turn into judgement against those who are not downtrodden, and Jesus warned us about doing that. “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone” was another of his teachings. He also taught that we should take the log out of our own eye before we try to pick the splinter out of our brother’s eye. I think that our church often needs to hear these teachings. For example, the United Church is currently demanding that Israel stop its treatment of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. It is a complicated issue to be sure, and we could spend a lot of time trying to understand it well enough to say anything constructive about it. However, I personally stay away from making judgement either way on this issue because I could never be able to appreciate what it means to have all your family incinerated in the Holocaust. The United Church also condemned the leaders of the world for their inaction on climate change in the recent Copenhagen meetings. We call for laws to force the reduction of greenhouse gases in the world. I know enough about this issue to recognize the quagmire of conflicting complications here. In each case the church stands in judgement just as the older brother stood in judgement of his father’s other son. Perhaps we in the church need to remember that the father loves each of his children with an infinite love. Perhaps we in the church might spend more time and energy on reaching out to our brothers and sisters in need and less time condemning our brothers and sisters in power. So, for the climate change issue for example, we organized an Eco Fair for the neighbourhood last year to help our neighbours reduce their carbon footprint, rather than spending our time writing letters to the Prime Minister or helping Greenpeace hang banners from the Peace Tower.

The final and perhaps the most important thing to take from this story is that the father could do nothing to help his younger son until that son “came to himself” as the scripture says and returned to his father’s house. Notice that the father did not send agents into the world looking for his lost son so that he could kidnap him, deprogram him and compel him to come home again. There is no coercion in the Kingdom of God. The son had to take the first step; he had to come home of his own free will. That seems to be how God’s grace works. God does not force goodness on us but waits with a persistent love by the side of the road, waiting for us to come to ourselves, turn around and come home again. In everything we are called to do by God the first step is up to us. But when we take that step we can be sure of God’s response: “Come quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!

Thanks be to God.

Amen