

March 6, 2016
Fourth Sunday in Lent

“A Mandate to Celebrate!”
by Mary Anne Biggs

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 ~ Luke 5:1-3, 11b-32

Most of us grew up calling Jesus’ story about a man and his two sons the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but it is not. Jesus does not begin his tale by saying, “There once was a man who had a father and an elder brother...” No, he says, “There was a man who had two sons” ... letting us know who the story is *really* about ... a father who loved his children to distraction and wanted them to love each other too. We may even be confused about the meaning of the word “prodigal.” We have all probably heard it used about someone who wanders and then returns. But that is not only too generous of an understanding ... and it is also incorrect. The truth of the matter is that “prodigal” actually means some one who is a “wastrel ... a squanderer ... one who cannot hold on to anything.”

The story is one of three that Jesus tells in a row after the Pharisees and scribes have taken him to task for eating with sinners. He doesn’t argue with them. He tells them stories instead ... about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to fend for themselves while he went after one stray ... about a woman who turned her house upside down in order to find one lost coin ... and about a compassionate

father who dealt compassionately with his two sons. All three stories address the Pharisees' concern that Jesus is condoning sin by keeping the company he keeps ... and all three reply that God is too busy rejoicing over found sheep, found coins and found children to worry about what they did while they were lost.

And according to this parable, no confession is necessary ... no promise of better behavior in the future ... no penance demanded. According to this parable, you don't have to earn your way. The loving father ... who sees you coming while you are still at a distance ... will rush out to embrace you ... and kiss you and forgive you ... before you can even get the words out of your mouth. Now that is excellent news for the prodigals among us isn't it? But it is also somewhat disturbing news, because forgiveness is one of those gifts from God that cuts both ways. Forgiveness is right ... right? We are all in need of it, and when we get it, from God and from one another, we know what "new" life is all about.

But forgiveness is forgiveness of sin ... and sin is wrong ... right? In order to be forgiven, someone has to have fallen short of the glory of God ... which may be as simple as having failed to be kind to someone ... but which also may be as complicated as having killed someone. Whatever the crime, very few of us would deny the possibility of forgiveness ... but most of us would insist on penance ...

the sinner's heartfelt confession and willingness to pay for the wrong that has been done. Then along comes this story of instant forgiveness with no strings attached, and we cannot miss the point ... that the extravagant love of God both *fulfills* and *violates* our sense of what is right.

Preachers often insult this parable by turning it into a cartoon, in which a sulking, mean-spirited older brother begrudges the love that a father shows for a reckless, fun-loving younger brother who has come home. But that is entirely too simple, and Jesus said nothing of the kind. Instead, he told a darker story ... a story about a younger son who was so hungry to see the world that he wished his own father dead ... at least symbolically ... by asking him to settle his estate early and give both brothers their share. So the father ... apparently valuing his child's freedom more than his own security ... divided his livelihood between them.

It's not that he gave the younger one some cash and hung on to the rest. He gave it all up to his two sons. And then he said goodbye to his younger son, who went off and squandered everything. Until one day he "came to himself." Now we might have been told that he repented ... that he had some kind of profound religious experience in the pigsty. But that is to overrate this young man. He was simply hungry. He seemed to be thinking of only one person ... himself! When he had

nothing left to lose he decided to go back home, composing a pretty calculated confession as he went ... one designed to get him back with a roof over his head and food in his stomach ... even if it meant that he had to live as a servant and not as a son.

He came home, in other words, to live off his brother's inheritance, having spent his own in loose living. And no sooner did his father see him coming down the road than he ran to meet him. Nowadays, people who run are considered pretty cool. But in Jesus' day men just didn't run ... to run was a sure sign that you had lost all dignity. But this father who let himself be taken advantage of, cares more for the boy than for his own dignity. He could have given the boy a thrashing, required heavy penance, sackcloth, fasting, ashes. But he ran to him! The elder brother's fattened calf was killed and the celebration was on! There were no extra steps between the younger son's return and his welcome home party ... no heart to heart with the old man ... no extra chores ... no go-to-your-room-for-a-week-and-think-about-what-you-have-done ... just a clean robe for his back and a fine ring for his hand, and a pair of new sandals for his feet. The father did not even wait for the elder son to get home from work before beginning the festivities, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" Then the elder

brother came home from the fields, heard the music and dancing, and I'm sure glad that I wasn't the one who had to tell him what it was all about!

Older siblings frequently get the raw end of the deal ... as the elder brother seems to at the end of this parable. My guess is that he was not incensed by his father's forgiveness of his brother, but by the celebration. Let the bad boy come home, by all means, but let him come home to penance ... not a party! Where is the moral instruction in that kind of welcome? What about facing the consequences of your actions? What about reaping what you sow? What kind of world would it be if we all made a practice of rewarding sinners while the God-fearing folk are still out in the fields?

I mean, what do you have to do to get a little attention around here? The church thrives on its ministries to the poor, the broken, the sick and outcast, but what about us who are holding our own? What about those of us who are burning our candles at both ends ... trying to serve God and keep up with our other responsibilities too? What about those of us who work hard to keep our jobs and stay in our relationships and take care of our health and pay our dues, but never seem to get any credit for it ... while the homeless and the addicted and the downtrodden get all the attention? What do you have to do to get a party around

here? Do you have to go off and squander your inheritance before you can come home to be embraced, and kissed and assured that you belong?

“Listen!” the elder son protests. “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

God help the elder son. God help him, and God help all of us who understand his rage ... who have felt so excluded and whose hurt has run so deep that we have cut ourselves off from the very ones whose love and acceptance we so desperately need. “This son of yours,” the elder brother said, excluding himself now from the family ... this son of yours who is no kin to me ... nor am I kin to you if you are going to chose him over me.

But here is where the loving father earns his title. He does not take a swing at this firstborn, as some might be tempted to do ... nor even remind him to honor his father. He knows he has lost both of his sons. He has lost the younger one to a life of recklessness, but he has lost the older one to a more serious fate...to a life of

angry self-righteousness that takes him so far away from his father that he might as well be feeding the pigs in a far country. The elder son wants his father to love him as he deserves to be loved ... because he has stayed put, and followed orders and done the right thing.

He wants his father to love him for all of that and his father does love him...but not for any of that ... any more than he loves the younger brother for what he has done. He does not love either of his sons according to what they deserve. He just loves them ... more because of who he is than because of who they are. And the elder brother cannot stand it. He cannot stand a love that transcends right and wrong ... a love that throws parties for prodigal sinners and expects the hard-working righteous to rejoice. He cannot stand it ... so he stands outside ... outside of his father's house ... and outside of his father's love ... refusing his invitation to come inside.

But his father turns out to be prodigal too ... a wastrel, a squanderer, one who cannot hold on to anything ... at least as far as his love is concerned. He never seems to tire of giving it away. "Son" he says, reclaiming the boy, "You are always with me, all that is mine is yours." His love for one child does not preclude his love for the other. The younger one's recklessness can not deflect

it any more than the older one's righteousness. They are a family ... they belong to one another, and a party for one is a party for all. "We had to celebrate and rejoice," the loving father says to his elder son, "because this brother of yours (notice he does not say "my" son ... but "your" brother) "was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." His response was filled with amazing grace wasn't it? Could anyone actually ever even do this? Well, the answer is yes ... when asked what he would do with the Confederates once the Civil War was over, Abraham Lincoln answered "I will treat them as if they had never gone away."

The father's response is the elder brother's invitation back into relationship ... not only with the loving father, but also with the wayward brother. It is an invitation to recognize his own "lostness and foundness."

But the parable doesn't tell us how it all turns out. The story ends with the elder brother standing outside the house in the yard with his father, listening to the party going on inside. I think that Jesus leaves it this way because it is up to each of us to finish the story. It is up to each one of us to decide whether we will stand outside all alone feeling "right" ... or give up on our rights and go inside to take our place at a table of reckless and righteous saints and scoundrels ... brothers and

sisters united only by our relationship to one loving father ... who refuses to give us the love that we deserve ... but cannot be prevented from giving us the love that we need.

May we pray?

Thank you, most gracious God, for this healing story. Thank you for satisfying our cravings. Thank you for faithfully waiting for us to return when we wander. But even more so... thank you for running towards us ... lifting us ... twirling us ... hugging us and loving us. And help us to do likewise. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.