

Prodigals All

This is the gospel story that I always have a tough time getting through without choking up.

Perhaps some of you experience that same emotion!

Perhaps it's because this story takes us to the boundary between the ordinary and the holy.

It invites us to see life through God's eyes, while giving us some sobering insights into what life, through human eyes, too often looks like.

The tension between our human disconnect and the overwhelming mercy of God makes this parable so difficult to tell without feeling overwhelmed.

The story begins with the goody two-shoes in the crowd (and let's face it — that's a lot of us here — it's definitely me!) getting bent out of shape over who Jesus decides to hang out with.

Those we too often dismiss as the low life's, the losers, the failures in our midst.

That perspective on life is the M.O. of the elder brother.

The one who is, at least in his own mind, always faithful, always working hard, always doing his best.

And that's where we need to start with today's story.

We start with the older brother because how many of us are so often taught, as we teach our children, to study hard, work hard and therefore succeed?

"Make good use of your time," we tell ourselves.

We tell our children.

"Idle hands are the devil's workshop!"

So we have said for centuries.

As we shape the world into something we can control.

The opposite side of that same coin is embodied in the irresponsible younger brother.

We are well trained to look askance at those who run off.

Those who abandon obligations.

Those who seek their fortune in strange and bizarre places: like drug trafficking, sex trafficking and all manner of criminal mischief.

Such are the boundaries, the outer limits, that Jesus puts before us today and asks us to consider.

Perhaps some of what this parable is driving at, as we hold it up to the light to see which of its many facets we might see today, is this.

That when all is said and done, it really doesn't matter whether we strive mightily and work hard and succeed — as that is defined by Madison Avenue.

As that is defined by our capitalist system.

As that is defined by the Wall Street Journal.

Nor does it necessarily cause destruction and death if we choose the opposite road and run willy-nilly off to the horizon, blowing whatever reserves we might've had.

Acting foolishly, stupidly, or even criminally.

It seems that Jesus today is saying that both of these options, both of these ways of living life, are in truth, accidental.

Not accidental like when you fall down and break your leg.

But accidental as in not really mattering that much; when all is said and done.

Perhaps what actually matters is the ability to be still, in love.

No matter who, what or why, got us to that place.

To find oneself, shockingly, frightfully rooted in a place where the hardworking egoist and the irresponsible cad can accept the remarkable truth that both are deeply, truly and forever — loved.

And to allow ourselves to see and hear and embrace that truth.

That the drug addict and the businessman (not always different people!), the sex addict and a newly seated supreme court justice (perhaps here too, not always different people!) the star student and the one with an F in every class, (they are always different people!), are in God's eyes, adored.

Can we wrap our minds around that fact?

More importantly, can we wrap our hearts around it?

And there is this.

It seems that we are so often fixated on avoiding failure.

Avoiding sin.

Avoiding the "bad things" in life.

Which perhaps explains why so many have watered Christianity down into a kind of Boy Scout way of life.

Don't lie, cheat or swear.

Watch your drinking.

Walk old ladies across the street.

All of which is perfectly fine.

Living by those virtues often creates a calmer and usually more financially secure life.

You'll probably have more friends, and influence more people!

It's just that these virtues can also be stumbling blocks when it comes to really entering deeply into our faith.

They can become stumbling blocks in being open to the miracle of undeserved grace.

The grace that says to the achiever "you can't earn it."

That says to the recalcitrant, "just turn around!"

"It's running right for you!"

Either way, there is one thing we need to do, no matter who you and I might be.

As my mentor so often says, it really is important that we sit with our failures.

To live for a time within our sin.

Within the "bad thing," whatever that may be.

Until it teaches us what we must learn.

Whatever our “pig sty moments” may be in life, can we, with the younger brother, sit with it for awhile?

And stop running from it?

Denying it?

Blocking it out?

People often go their whole lives fighting off temptations — and yet succumbing to them over and over again — because they simply won't consciously live with the temptation for a time.

Accepting it.

Owning it.

So many, especially us in the older brother camp, don't allow ourselves to face the smugness, the cruelty, the smallness — that motivates self-satisfaction — which can be released only after it's acknowledged, recognized, accepted.

Only then can its stranglehold, its power, finally be depleted.

The younger brother faced his “pig sty moment,” and then took the steps needed to go to that place where grace was just waiting to overwhelm him.

Will the older brother face his “pig sty moment?”

Will he recognize that just as he scorns his brother for demanding half of dad's estate — dad in fact split his inheritance between **the two of them!**?

Will big brother come to grips with the shibai that, although in his father's eyes he is the beloved who's been given all that his father has, yet he stubbornly insists on seeing himself as a mere hired hand — who's not just under appreciated, but over-worked too?!

Will big brother come to grips with the fact that his self-righteousness is simply the other side of the irresponsible wastefulness coin that his younger brother embodies?

Which is why Boy Scout Christianity is so dangerous.

It creates older brother mentalities.

And Jesus is here to put an end to that mentality.

He's come to get rid of both the irresponsible wastefulness and self-righteous sides of this same misguided coin.

Isn't that what Paul is saying when he speaks of Christ "becoming sin in order to destroy sin?"

Which is a punch in the eye way of saying "before we loved God, God loved us!"

There's nothing to DO to earn God's love, compassion, mercy.

We need only RECEIVE it.

Welcome it.

Embrace it.

That's the point of the party, isn't it?

We're all of us — home free!

If I have to earn, deserve, or be entitled to my salvation, who needs a savior?

And when that truth finally sinks in, in the very midst of our human imperfection, our hubris, then all's we can do is look up and, with a smile, say:

Thank You!

As the wise old general in Babette's Feast says:

"Man in his weakness and shortsightedness believes that he must make choices in this life.

He trembles at the risk he takes.

Yes, we know fear.

But no, our choice is of no importance.

There comes a time when our eyes are opened, and we come to realize that mercy is infinite.

We need only await it with confidence — and receive it with gratitude.

Mercy imposes no conditions.

And lo!

Everything we have chosen has been granted to us.

And everything we rejected — has also been granted.

Yes, we get back even what we rejected.

For mercy and truth have met together.

Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another."

+amen