

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C

March 14, 2020

Joshua 5: 9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21; Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Joshua 5:9-12

{9} The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. *{10}* While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. *{11}* On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. *{12}* The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Psalm 32

{1} Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. *{2}* Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. *{3}* While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. *{4}* For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah *{5}* Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah *{6}* Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. *{7}* You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah *{8}* I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. *{9}* Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. *{10}* Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. *{11}* Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

{16} From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. *{17}* So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! *{18}* All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; *{19}* that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. *{20}* So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. *{21}* For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

{1} Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. *{2}* And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." *{3}* So he told them this parable... *{11b}* "There was a man who had two sons. *{12}* The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. *{13}* A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. *{14}* When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. *{15}* So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. *{16}* He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. *{17}* But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! *{18}* I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; *{19}* I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" *{20}* So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. *{21}* Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' *{22}* But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. *{23}* And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; *{24}* for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. *{25}* "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. *{26}* He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. *{27}* He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted

calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' [28] Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. [29] But he answered his father, 'Listen! 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. [30] But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' [31] Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32] But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Gratefully, for as many strange and difficult ones, there are also many beautiful and profound stories in the Bible and the parable of the "Prodigal Son", as it is commonly called, is certainly high on that list.

There are several temptations. One is that because the story is so well known and familiar, we stop really listening. We've heard it before and we know the ending. Always nice to hear, but nothing really new. Another is a pitfall for preachers. We want to look for something new, fresh, novel, and perhaps even brilliant and original to say about this "classic". (As it turns out, I *do* have a bit of a "twist", probably not all that original and certainly not brilliant. More on that in a few moments.) In both cases, we risk missing the main point and purpose of this strange and beautiful parable.

As I said, this is among the best-known, and perhaps even best-written, stories in the Bible. Because of the many details provided and the character development, we could all too easily get side tracked by looking into things like "family dynamics", "sibling rivalry", "birth order", psychological profiles on the characters, or even the inheritance practices of the Ancient Near East. Actually, in my preparation for this sermon I've seen some creative discussion on each of these things, and even more! Doing this might yield some helpful and even insightful information, but, again, it risks missing the point.

Perhaps we do such things to avoid where the story ultimately leaves us. Despite the passage of almost two thousand years and the vast differences in cultures, I'm still left with both a "warm fuzzy" feeling ("Isn't that nice! I'm so glad.") *and* with another "voice" telling me, "Wait a minute. This isn't fair! This just doesn't make any sense!" Maybe *that* is exactly the point.

I've said this before, but I believe the best way to understand most, if not all of the parables, is as stories about God. The parable of the Prodigal Son is no exception. In this case, to be more specific, we have a story about *grace*, even if the word is not used there. As demonstrated by the character of the father, we hear a story about a love that "never says never". We hear about a love that doesn't seem the least bit interested in, concerned

about, or in any way affected by, the actions, attitudes, and decisions of those to whom it is given. No strings attached. No guilt. No shame. Not even a stern lecture. That's crazy! Just doesn't make any sense. Certainly isn't fair. Too easy. Not enough incentive. Open to all kinds of abuse and misunderstanding. Someone could get hurt (Actually, as we read on in the Gospel, we find out that Someone did get hurt).

Is this *really* the way God operates? Is this really what grace "looks like"?

I think part of the reason Jesus told stories like this one (it is addressed to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes, after all), was precisely to show how pointless it is to try to figure it out. "Yeah, this is how God operates. Get over it." So, Jesus is sort of being "in your face", but He is also issuing an invitation. Rather than trying to make sense of the whole grace thing, welcome it, receive it, celebrate it. Join the party, even if those on the guest list wouldn't be your own choices. Grab a beverage. Have an hors d'oeuvre or two. Stay a while. If you do, you'll find that *you* begin to change a bit. It all just sort of "gets under your skin". *From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view...So 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...* (2 Corinthians 5: 16a, 17, 18a)

Besides, if grace was "fair" or "logical", where would that leave any of us?

Here's my "twist".

Traditionally, the younger "prodigal" son gets most of the attention. If there is a hero, then my guess is that many people would say it was him. Despite some youthful indiscretions, he really did manage to turn his life around and "do the right thing". The next candidate for "hero" would be the father (albeit in a weird, kind of co-dependent way). If any attention is paid to the older brother, it tends to be negative: "What a jerk! What a 'party pooper'".

The truth is, *both* sons are big time jerks. Neither one of them realized what they had.

Do we?

Stay with me here. Back in the day, when I was twenty years old, I was part of the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church (existed in other Churches as well). Through that renewal movement in the Church, numerous people had profound and life changing conversions. Many times, at prayer meetings or other gatherings, such people would share their "testimonies" and, boy, were they "juicy". So, for the longest time I thought there

must have been something wrong with me because, although it may have been a bit sad and twisted, my story was rather ordinary and lackluster. Like the older brother in today's Gospel story, I had never strayed very far from "home". Sometimes I wished I had or thought I should!

In my fifty first year I'm finally beginning to hear the good news in this line: "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." (Luke 15: 31). Wow!

Here's the point. Whether or not you have stayed or strayed is, ultimately, unimportant. Realize what you have right now. Don't be so blind or so stubborn as to miss out on what is always there for the receiving.

Own and embrace your story. Not because it is juicy, dull, dramatic, or ordinary, but because you and your story are always embraced by the God who loves you just as you are and for whom running six inches or six hundred miles to meet you is all the same.

AMEN.