

4 Lent – 14 March 2010 – The Rev. Madelyn L. Betz

Joshua 5:9-12 • Psalm 32 • II Corinthians 5:16-21 • Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 • Fourth Sunday in Lent • March 14, 2010 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you're a fan of Irish folk songs, you may be familiar with "The Wild Rover."

After several verses extolling the pleasures of a wild life, the last verse is this:

I'll go home to me parents, confess what I've done,
and I'll ask them to pardon their prodigal son.
And if they forgive me as oft times before,
I never will play the wild rover no more.

The story of the Prodigal Son continues in popular culture through art, drama, literature and music as one of the best known of Jesus' teaching stories. It enjoys broad universal appeal because of the number of very personal ways we can relate to it. The relationships in the story fuel its power and capture our imaginations. It is only recorded by Luke and is the concluding story in a set of three: the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal Son. The notion of "lost and found" is thus considered through three different lenses, yet each story puts us in touch with God's faithful and never-ending desire for all, with the purpose of letting the scribes and Pharisees know that God's kingdom includes more than just them.

The power of the story before us today is at least two-fold: It isn't a parable about what we do, so much as about who we are. We can relate to the Prodigal, who has made mistakes, repents and is forgiven.

We also rely on the description of the father as a description of God, who is always waiting for us with open, loving arms and a forgiving heart. The story line and dynamics between the father and son summarize the whole history of humanity's relationship to God.

Another power at work in this particular story is the amount of energy it holds. This parable doesn't merely invite us into reflection, as much as it reaches out and grabs us by the throat. Identifying where the energy exists around and between the characters can give us clues about the energy in our own lives, both the energy coming toward us and our own. Reflecting on this story can help us identify where the positive energy is in our lives that enriches, nourishes and enlivens us to action and where the negative energy is that saps our strength and deflates our spirit. Is our energy sweeping us along on a positive path or are we often sidetracked and stuck in a vortex of the negative?

The most positive energy in today's story is around the father, the main character. I name him the main character because he is the focal point around whom the other characters revolve. He is the one who has suffered the loss. It is his reaction that will affect the outcome. He has only good qualities: compassion, patience, love, and forgiveness. He is even-handed in his concern for both sons. He is a metaphor for God, whose mercy and openness were at the heart of Jesus' mission to restore and reconcile all people to God.

Our energy also goes toward the younger son. He begins badly, selfishly and sinks as low as he can go. He takes his inheritance, goes far away and squanders it all. Then he hires himself out to feed pigs – anathema to faithful Jews. But then he comes to his senses and turns himself around. He makes a plan, and even rehearses to himself the speech that he will make to his father. And he gets himself up and sets off for home. This is admirable and the listeners and readers of this story are *expected* to share the father's compassion for this younger son.

As he nears home, the action in the story picks up. The father sees him, runs to him, embraces and kisses him. And the son only gets part way through his speech before the father interrupts and calls for a robe and a ring and sandals. Let the celebration begin! The dead has returned alive; the lost has been found!

In keeping with the preceding parables in this set, rejoicing ensues when the lost has been restored. And this story isn't about an animal or a thing. It is about a son. There are no recriminations or punishments – only unqualified love and joy!

When the older brother appears in the story, he siphons off the positive energy. He is full of anger and, like a petulant child, refuses to go in to the celebration. The benevolent father comes out to him, but, like air escaping from a loose balloon, we can sense his positive energy dissipating as he hears a litany of complaints, sarcasm, and exaggeration.

The father had been alienated from both sons – and only the younger had come to his senses and returned. The older son was stuck on the word “should:” what his brother and father should do, how he should be treated, what he should have received. He had been good; it just wasn’t fair!

The problem of fairness is at the heart of the prodigal son story. The Christian apologist C.S. Lewis wrote about fairness in his book *Mere Christianity*. He laid out a very detailed and logically progressive argument about the way people appeal to fairness when judging behavior. For example, there aren’t any rules, per se, about cutting in line at the grocery store, but we don’t do it. And if someone does do it, we appeal to fairness. “I’m waiting my turn; it’s only fair that you should too!” Lewis maintains that our common sense of fairness is a clue that God exists. Otherwise, what is this higher authority that we appeal to? We *feel* that we know how people ought to act and we get offended when they don’t. Our appeal to fairness is most often used to justify why someone else is in the wrong and we are in the right. Focus on “fairness” is focus on the word “should.” And “should” is a word that binds up a lot of energy.

In my family of origin, I’m the little sister with one older brother. As we were growing up, there was a fairly regular refrain at our house and the refrain was “That’s not fair!” Neither my brother nor I owned the phrase, but I remember that we both used it rather freely. I don’t know if siblings still say that, but I think generally children

have a pretty well-honed idea of fairness, measured in terms of benefit to me weighed against perceived benefit to you. For me, the biblical story that breaks open and shakes up this childish understanding of fairness is the story of the prodigal son. If we don't get beyond that childish understanding, we remain in the land of "should," focusing on the behavior of others.

The older brother is angry because he perceived that he had been treated unfairly by his father. But by forgiving the younger brother, the father had taken nothing away from the older son. In all three parables of lost and found, of restoration and rejoicing, Jesus was trying to make the point to the Pharisees and the scribes that his compassion for and inclusion of tax collectors and sinners did not take anything away from them.

The "elephant in the room," if you will, as we consider the story of the prodigal son is how often and closely we do relate to the older brother, who is so resentful, feeling taken advantage of and slighted. The family dynamics in this story are messy and are quite real because of it. When the parable does its work, at the end, we are left with a degree of discomfort and judgment.

Feeling like the older brother is a very human way to feel. But we can move forward as Paul told the Christians in Corinth. "From now on," he wrote, "we regard no one from a human point of view." We aren't stuck. In fact, in Christ, we are new creatures. In Christ, God reconciled us to himself *and* has turned over to us the on-going ministry of reconciliation.

In Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son, A Story of Homecoming*, he describes his own spiritual journey according to the framework of this parable. Nouwen ultimately describes how all Christians—himself included—struggle to free themselves from the weaknesses inherent in both brothers. And he concludes that all Christians are destined to find ourselves evermore becoming the all-giving, all-forgiving, sacrificial father.

Indeed, we enact this transformation each time we receive communion. In the very act of reaching out our hands to receive the body and blood of Christ, we affirm that we are not stuck in our human-ness. Like the prodigal, we step out to enact acceptance of relationship with the Father. Then, when we reach out to others in compassion, love and forgiveness, we find that we have become the father. Our creation is re-created. We become participants in creation by re-embodying God's Spirit.

“So,” Paul wrote, “we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is now making his appeal through us.” [II Cor. 5:20] Mr. Ambassador. Madam Ambassador. Represent the kingdom well. Amen.