

There and Back Again
Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year C - 03/31/2019
Psalm Reading: 32
1st Reading: 2 Cor. 5:16-21, 2nd: Luke 15:11-32

I am pretty sure that every one of us has been on a long journey to somewhere, and in the course of that journey met with some unfortunate circumstance. We forgot to pack something vital, we lost our passport in a foreign country, or we simply got lost somewhere between here and there and back again. For me, it never fails that when I return home from one of these journeys, it is with a great deal of relief and joy. I tend to believe that vacations are to remind us of how good we have it at home.

But you know, sometimes we take a spiritual journey that has very little to do with physical distance and everything to do with where we are at in our relationships with each other and with God. Jesus, in our reading from the Gospel of Luke, tells just such a story. We often call it the parable of the prodigal son. But it is so much more.

Jesus begins, "There was a man who had two sons." (NIV, Luke 15:11) Two sons...so immediately we know there are two people who are going to be in relation to each other, and we also know that they are brothers. And you know that between two brothers there is always going to be some kind of competition. At least that was the way it was with my brother and me. It was a never ending competition over who could run faster, jump higher or get the biggest bowl of ice cream on a hot summer day. We have seen such relationships often

enough in the Bible, there was Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his ELEVEN brothers. So in this story, we know there is something going on here from the beginning.

At this point the brothers are both young men, the younger of the two asks for his share of the inheritance he is ultimately expecting. Think about that for just a moment. What would you think if your grown child came to you asking for their inheritance?! First, you would question them on what they wanted it for. But second you might feel just a little offended, as if the child were treating you with disrespect. In fact, in the ethos of those ancient times when Jesus was telling this parable, the younger son was treating his father with disrespect, as if his father were already dead! Rather a cheeky move, don't you think?

So the father, a merciful and gracious guy, more gracious and merciful than I would have been, says "okay". He liquidates a third of his estate (It is a third because the oldest son by law is entitled to 2 parts) and puts the cash on the barrel head. (v.12) The old man can't be too happy about it because he knows exactly what is going to happen. As we all do, I am sure. After all, this younger brother was inexperienced and, well...Jesus tells us that after he "got together all he had, [he] set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living." Yeehaw! No, thought for tomorrow, live now while the living is easy! So, in a far country the young man goes on a spending spree with little thought to what will happen when the cash runs out as inevitably it must.

So naturally, right about the time the money runs out, there is a famine, no doubt any food is hard to come by and the

son resorts to finding a way to subsist. Which means, in this country, hit by want and need, he will accept ANY job he can find. In this case he finds employment as a swineherd. (v.15) For a Jew of this period this is as degrading as it gets. Jews consider pigs unclean in a religious sense as well as in a physical sense. So this journey the young man is on has taken him away from home and family not only physically, but in every way possible. It has carried him into unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar work. It has led him away from his religion as he becomes a servant to the very beasts he has been taught from birth he should not eat or even touch. It would seem that he has gone as far as he possibly can away from his father, his home, even in a sense, away from himself.

And it is at this point when he has journeyed so far away from where he knows that he should be, that, as the Revised Standard Version tells us, "He came to himself." Other versions say he came to his senses. But I like this idea that he came to "himself" because I think it reveals something about the human psyche about how we relate to the world and deep down, who we are.

I believe that when we sin, when we make a mistake in this life, that this mistake does not necessarily define, deep down, who we are. When we allow a mistake to be a formative experience for us, if we use it to mold us into better people, then it has served an ultimately good purpose. That is not to say that we should go around doing bad things just so that we can learn from them. Far from it. But, by the same token, as a wise man has told me on more than one occasion, "If you never make a mistake, it means that you are not doing anything." My

point is...having sinned in the past does not define the person we are right now.

And it does not define how God sees us. Because as you know, Jesus Christ died for our sins. When God looks at us in our sinful state, God sees the sacrifice that Jesus made for us and because of that sacrifice loves us all the more.

So, when the prodigal son came “to himself” he was already almost home. It seems all he needed was to reconcile himself with his father. And as it turns out, the father had already forgiven the son. He had been waiting, watching down the road for the son’s return, and when he saw the son he jumped up and ran to him. (v.20) But it was the son who needed to reconcile himself to the father. And he had a whole speech planned out, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.” (v.19)

When the prodigal son had gotten half-way through this much rehearsed speech the father interrupted him. He put a robe on him. He had a ring placed on his finger and sandals put on his feet. The fatted calf was to be served up at a celebration for the son’s return. He had been there, to the very depths of depravity and despair, and come back again. The son now fully understood just how much the father loved him.

Wow, what a wonderful story about being lost and now found, about return and reconciliation. And of course, we know it is about our own journey away from and back to God. It just warms the cockles of your heart, what ever cockles are. Doesn’t it? But you may have noticed that this is not the end of the story. There is another son, that competitive elder brother that

was mentioned right there in the first verse of the parable. I don't see any reconciliation there; do you? At least not at this point in the story.

This was the responsible brother. The one who stayed behind. The one who worked for the father all this time that the Prodigal was off on his physical and spiritual journey. The older brother is perhaps feeling like he has gone nowhere. He is in the same place physically as when he started, and if he has moved at all spiritually, it may just be in a negative direction.

He is a little bitter about the fact that the younger son has returned. He complains that the younger son has been coddled, and celebrated by the father, while all of his own diligence has been overlooked. So, if this were a television series you could see the seeds for conflict in future episodes. But praise be to God that our lives and relationships are not based on TV series. What happens in this parable, which is no longer really about the prodigal son, is that the father intervenes. He tells the older brother, "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours." Which in this case turns out to be actually true. The younger son took his share of the estate already, the older son left his share in the hands of the father who is alive and loving.

And so we have the father reconciling the older brother to the younger. And we as people need to understand that we must be reconciled to one another, whatever our past, whatever our political views, whatever our genetic makeup. We are all sisters and brothers to each other. And do you know? Christ is also our brother. Christ is the son of God, and we are children of God. That creates a close relation that cannot be

severed. We are all made in the image of God so we should be in close relation with our fellows.

So what is this parable about? The prodigal wastrel of a son who learns his lesson? Is it about the older bitter son who feels cheated but comes to realize there is an ultimate reward and is reconciled to brother and father? Or is this parable really about the reconciling love of the father who loves all his children and works to bring them in close relation with each other?

Of course, it is about all three. There is so much breadth and depth in these stories, these parables, told by Jesus. So much we can learn about how we humans live, and how we ought to live. But if we take only one thing away from this parable it should be that the Father's love is infinite in its ability to reconcile relationships, these relationships we have with each other, our brothers and sisters who are all on a physical and spiritual journey with us. And we are all on a journey in this life, going somewhere, out into the world. It is God's love that ultimately brings us back to the place where we belong...home with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And so we are destined to travel...there and back again.

Please put yourselves in a posture for prayer...

Lord God our Father, we sometimes wander and stray, sometimes we remain home but become stagnant in our faith. With scales over our eyes we do not see how much you love us. Either way your arms are always open to our coming to you in prayer or in praise. Lord, bring us closer to each other, and hold us in the palm of your hand.

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