

“The Prodigal Father”

Luke 15.1-3 and 11b-32

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 18 March 2007

At first glance, we all think this familiar parable is a really nice story, don't we? Little brother messes up; little brother comes home; dad rejoices; all is well.

But, speaking as a big brother... I have to tell you that I resonate strongly with the plight of the prodigal's older sibling, and I suspect that when we pay attention to the parable, a lot of us do. We relate well to being the one who stays home to work...to being the faithful child...the one who “does the right thing”...who doesn't blow the family inheritance on cocaine or prostitutes.

And, truth be told, we can probably relate to the righteous indignation of the older brother when his wastrel younger brother returns home to a feast, in spite of smelling like swine (pigs, remember, were a no-no for observant Jews). Being “prodigal” (a word that doesn't occur in the scripture) basically means being extravagant...which really was not the worst thing the young man did. And the things he blew his money on were less about extravagance, and more about self-indulgence and addiction.

We, however, like being righteous and just. We like doing the right thing. We like being held up as an example for other people to follow. So, let's face it...most of the time, you and I *are* the big brother.

One of the phrases I am hearing with increasing frequency from my six-year-old son, Christopher, is “it isn't fair!” When we ask him to pick up his toys...“it isn't fair!” When we need to take him with us to do errands...“it isn't fair!” And I wonder if the big brother in this parable – in his heart of hearts – wanted to have a *grand-mal* tantrum in front of his father and yell, “it isn't fair!”

“Fair,” of course, is a relative term. We all have different definitions. Some of us think the death penalty is fair. Some of us think affirmative action is fair. Some of us even think fishing with live bait is fair. It all depends on our point of view.

So, what do you think would have been fair in this story: for the partying frat boy to come home to a hero's welcome? Or maybe that he would come home and need to repay the money he had squandered? Or perhaps a “tough-love” reception: that he wouldn't be welcomed back at all, at least until he had made some form of recompense?

There is a verse we haven't talked about yet...actually two verses. While deciding to leave his not-so-lovely profession as a swineherd, the young man thinks to himself: “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

This is critically important in the story. The party animal has a moment of *metanoia* – literally changing of the mind or as we might be more apt to say, a change of heart. The young guy who thought that investing in fast cars, prostitutes, and recreational drugs has to “hit bottom” in order to see that he has made a mess of his life. And for a Jew to be working with pigs is a nearly unthinkable occupation. It means that he not only stinks, but that he is ritually unclean. But he has come to a moment of realization that he has to change course.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, and other 12-step programs, step three involves making “a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” And I can imagine the younger brother saying, “Blew my inheritance...check. Got STD from a prostitute...check. Got busted for smoking dope...check. Worked with pigs to support my habit...check. Nearly

starved...check.” And I think that this inventory basically let him know that it was time to change.

The fourth step in AA is admitting “to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” And that is what the son did next.

It takes guts on the part of the younger son to say the words of confession: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Think of a time in your life when you have hit bottom, when you have really screwed up royally, and you think there is no way out. And see if you can remember coming to someone – and to God – with a major confession of your fault.

Without *metanoia* – change of heart – and without the confession of fault, there is no path to true reconciliation.

But what happens when we do have a deep inner change and we attempt to rebuild the bridges that we had torn down?

Not all humans have the capacity to forgive and to move on. One of the stellar examples of such a process that did work is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the wake of apartheid in South Africa. Persons who had been injured were able to tell their story in front of the accused person, who had the opportunity to hear their pain and understand their suffering, and then have the opportunity to apologize, and to be reconciled with their victim. Though not a perfect process, it was an amazing instance of *metanoia* and reconciliation in God’s world today. And if that isn’t a miracle, and Desmond Tutu isn’t a saint, then I’m not prepared to call myself a Christian.



I’m going to suggest that we need to rename this story. I think it should be called the “Parable of the Prodigal Father.” It was the father – not either son – who was extravagant. “Quickly,” he cried to his servants, “bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

Imagine if you came to your father having done a string of horrendous things and blown a huge sum of money and then admitted you were wrong and begged for forgiveness. What would your father have done?

Imagine if you came into your boss and said, “I’m really sorry, but I just blew the annual budget on an off-site party for the staff in Cancun, but I’m really, really sorry.” (You’d be really, really fired.)

Now, imagine that you fell short of the standards of Christian conduct. You acted unjustly. You were untruthful. You were not trustworthy. You took a tax deduction you weren’t entitled to. You envied your neighbor’s car. You took out your bad mood on your kids. You indulged yourself instead of caring for others. Imagine coming to God with that, and imagine being able to confess your sin...and imagine how God would respond.

Now, you may think that confession is “a Catholic thing,” but individual reconciliation is something we sometimes need help with, which is why there is an order for “individual reconciliation” in the *UCC Book of Worship*. Sharon and I are available if you need help asking for God’s forgiveness.

We all mess up. And we all do things we shouldn’t and we fail to do everything we ought to do. And there is a way to clear things up. But we have to take the initiative to approach God and the persons we’ve injured in asking for forgiveness.



One of the watchwords of the UCC in recent years was coined by John Thomas, our general minister and president. It is that we in the UCC aim to extend “God’s extravagant welcome” to all persons. Now, for a bunch of people descended from the Puritans, *extravagance* seems just plain wrong. But listen to this response and tell me if you don’t think it describes the extravagance of God: “While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion...” And after feeling compassion, he adorns his repentant son with the best robe, sandals on his bare, and a ring on his finger, and a belly filled with the finest veal.

It would have been enough if the father saw his son coming home, was filled with compassion and said, “You’re right, you really messed up, and I am willing to let you work side by side with your older brother, but your inheritance is gone, so you’ll need to work for your keep.”

In the Passover liturgy, there is a song called “dayenu,” which means “it would have been enough.” Over the recitation of 15 verses from the Exodus story, the family chants “Day- dayenu, day- dayenu, day- dayenu, dayenu, dayenu.” It would have been enough if God had brought us out of slavery. It would have been enough if God had provided for our needs for 40 years in the wilderness. It would have been enough if God had given us the sabbath.

It would have been enough if the father had welcomed the younger son home, but he went so much further than that. Who is extravagant here: the father or the younger son?! God is extravagantly compassionate and provides a welcome to every person who is willing to approach. How has God been extravagant with you? Is it extravagance to see the Front Range of the Rockies every day? Is it extravagance to feel the love of children and parent? Is it extravagance to have a congregation of people who will support you and love you just as you are, and who you are becoming? Dayenu!

And we, too, are called to be daughters and sons of God, not only in the confession of our sins, but also in extending God’s extravagant welcome to others and acting in the same compassionate manner that characterizes God...which isn’t always easy, but it’s worth attempting.

How do we provide an extravagant welcome at Plymouth? How do we act in the manner that God does? How do we say, “Welcome Home?” Having decent coffee and deliver bread to the homes of visitors is a start. So is being Open & Affirming. But there is more we can do. We can be sure to welcome and connect those who may be here for the first time...or people we just haven’t yet befriended. If Plymouth could be known for something I would hope it would be our compassion and extravagant welcome.

Extravagance may go against the grain, the same way this parable seems “unfair.” But that is an integral part of the message of Jesus that we need to incorporate into our thinking, believing, and acting today.

May we go out and act like the prodigal...father.
Amen.