

The Venerable Rena Turnham

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 27, 2022

ECMN Lenten Preaching Series and 3-27-22 Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral

Luke 15:1-3, 11B-32

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Today, as we listen to this passage in Luke's gospel, we have an opportunity to delve into another one of Jesus' parables, his own stories he used to illustrate his teachings.

At first glance, parables may appear simple and yet they can be quite complex. Even today, the characters in these ancient stories can come alive for us when we're able to personally connect with one of the characters, perhaps in a previous life stage or within our present selves.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, was told by Jesus to the Pharisees and the scribes in response to their grumbling about the company he's been keeping. They weren't not having it. Tax collectors and sinners had been gathering to listen to Jesus and that had the Pharisees and scribes questioning Jesus legitimacy and his authority as a teacher.

In their minds, the godly do not dine with the ungodly; the clean do not associate with the defiled.

In fact, they believed they were to be as far away as possible from them. Their focus was on the sins of these people, not on the sinners, the people, themselves.

We don't get all the details about the younger son's reckless adventures prior to him returning to his father.

We have some idea about what he was up to, but we aren't given a laundry list of sins the younger son has committed.

Perhaps this is because this kind of detail may make us focus in on the sins, and not the sinner, just as the Pharisees and scribes did.

So Jesus tells the Pharisees and the scribes this parable so that they can see that God's focus and care is on the sinners, not on the sins themselves.

And that in proximity and in community with these people, where Jesus spent most of his time, is where God calls us to be.

In this way, Jesus turns everything upside down—living on the margins of society and in relationship with the outcast, illustrating once again what God's desire is for us, to be reconciled to him and to one another.

In the 5th Century, this parable was given the name The Prodigal Son; 'prodigal' here meaning wasteful and reckless.

While preparing to preach on this gospel text, I was struck with the number of different titles this parable has been given in recent years.

I also became aware of how these titles shaped how I looked at the story, which characters I identified with, or not.

Here's are a few of the alternate titles for The Prodigal Son that I came across:

The Forgiving Father

The Lost Son

The Lost Child

The Lovesick Father

The Two Brothers

The Compassionate Father

How does this story take on different hues for you when these alternative titles are used?

That's both the danger and the invitation in titling the parables.

And how about this title—The Lost Sons.

'Sons,' plural. This is the lens that captivates me and the one that I'd like to explore further.

Through this story title, The Lost Sons, it's been revealed to me that the older son has also been lost, in reaction to his father's treatment of his younger brother.

And perhaps before that.

Maybe it's now just become apparent.

We don't know if the older son finally decided to join the homecoming celebration, or not.

We don't know if he will be 'found.'

There is a decision to be made by the older son, a decision to turn towards, to even 'come home' or to continue to be turned away from both his father and his brother.

This moment in the story is ripe with possibility, and that possibility, that invitation from the father is there and that's where the story stops and leaves us hanging.

Both sons were lost, one lost when he asked his father for his inheritance before he ever left home, that same son having returned, proclaimed 'found' and then welcomed with joy, the other son now on the margins, on the tipping point of being part of welcoming his brother back into the fold, and the reconciling of this family, and yet not.

He has an opportunity to reorder and reconcile OR walk away disgruntled and angry, never to recover, and never to fully return to the father.

This is a story about being lost and then found and then rejoicing in that.

This is the third in a series in Luke, the first one being The Lost Sheep, the second, The Lost Coin, and now this story of The Lost Son.

All are stories about finding and reuniting what was lost and feeling the joy in that.

This particular parable isn't about a thing or an object of value, it's about God's children, what God values most, being lost and then found, it's about repentance and right relationship, it's about reconciliation between God and God's people, God, made manifest in Jesus Christ.

This is also our invitation into this ministry of reconciliation, reconciliation with one another.

Paul speaks about this to the community in Corinth in his second letter—reminding them that they were given the ministry of reconciliation and that the message of reconciliation has been entrusted to them.

And as we gather even now, this is OUR ministry.

Especially NOW.

This can be practiced wherever we find ourselves. In our own relationships—in our families, families much like this family we hear about today in this gospel text, torn apart by misunderstandings, judgement, trauma, and more.

The last two years of enduring this pandemic has put enormous strains on our relationships and support systems of all shapes and sizes.

In my particular case, it was a catalyst in bringing about the end of my 31 year marriage and the breaking apart of my family.

This has been extremely painful for me and my adult children, my family of origin, and my circle of friends.

Imagine throwing a boulder into a pond and watching the giant ripples create waves that pour over everything in their wake and splash the shore, causing the water to travel further inland from the shore, and splashing back again. The waves – the turbulence -impacts everyone in the wake of divorce.

There is so much yet unresolved, unsaid and in need of healing. I acknowledged my own woundedness and things I have done and left undone. There are many splintered relationships and sometimes I don't know where to start to put them back together in the reality of a changed set of circumstances and my newly transformed self.

In many ways, I can see myself as both siblings in this parable. But I keep coming back to the father and my own desire to be found and received, known, and loved.

Through my journey in the last 18 months, I have known God's love, been embraced, and held in that love and through the love shared with me by many people. Many people are helping me to heal in a way that I can then be an agent of healing in my close relationships in need of healing.

You see, our healing is mutual, bound up in one another, and God.

This is what it means to belong to God and to one another.

Are YOU hungry for this kind of healing and reconciliation?

Aren't we ALL hungry for this, even when we're not facing a major crisis or in the wake of a traumatic event?

Perhaps you now find yourself on the margins, on the outside, for whatever reason.

How about our neighborhoods and the towns and cities we live in—where DO WE find the tax collectors and sinners, the outcasts, where we work and live?

This is precisely where Jesus calls us to, to that place and to these people and to the ministry of healing and reconciliation, in the image of the father, as lived by Jesus in the flesh.

As I begin to close, I'd like to offer one more title for this parable for your consideration:

God's Prodigal Love

You see, prodigal can also mean lavish, extravagant, excessive.

God's Prodigal Love

This story title invites us to contemplate God's overflowing, excessive, extravagant love as exemplified by the father's love for BOTH sons.

We are all people starving for God's Prodigal Love-God's ridiculously lavish and generous compassion and love, and especially those who find themselves on the ever expanding margins of our society...as the opportunity gap in our state widens, as transgender people face continued setbacks in inclusion, as the numbers of immigrant detainees continues to rise in this country, and at this very moment as Ukrainians struggle to keep themselves out of harm's way and are being forced to become refugees of war.

It is we who see, day by day, in sharper and sharper focus the reality of our communities and our world and *how far off* we are from God's dream of Beloved Community.

We feel it in our own heartbreak.

As we come out of some of the darkest days of the pandemic into what some call 'the new normal' and as we fire up the engine of 'church' and look towards 'full speed ahead' for life in our faith communities, we are graciously afforded a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to not just seek what we have lost together and tend to our collective and communal trauma, but we also have a new opportunity to be ever more compassionate and loving as we tend to the cares and concerns of our neighborhoods and our local communities and the traumas they've suffered. We can choose to faithfully respond to the depths of the world's longing for God's overflowing, excessive, extravagant love, for healing and reconciliation.

God's Prodigal Love—for me, for you, for us and for the world, begins in our acknowledgement of the desire and need for this great love and is made manifest through our active turning to embrace, accept, and live into it, witnessing to it and making this invitation known to others, most especially those on the margins.

This is the heart of Jesus' ministry and the call for all Christian communities. While our contexts may be different, the call to compassion and love is clear. How we choose to live that our we're able to discern for ourselves in community.

We have the gift of the Holy Spirit as our guide.

What would it mean for us to dwell in this parable in community with one another, within ECMN, in our individual congregations? How might we imagine a different kind of homecoming, one that is transformative for all? Will we have the strength to let go of some of the ways of being that no longer serve us or those we seek to serve?

We simply can't carry it all forward, we must leave some of it at the door to the homecoming banquet and walk in.

*We will, with God's help.*