

4 Lent; Year C

March 31, 2019

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalms 32

2 Cor 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The readings assigned for today certainly echo the Lenten theme of self examination.

David in Psalm 32: Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven.

Paul in Cor: "From now on... there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Christ offers us new life.

Jesus: tells of the disrespectful, arrogant, wayward son who comes home, forgiven.

This rich Gospel story is called the parable of the prodigal son; but it has a lot to say about the older son, and certainly about the father. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were muttering about Jesus, because he welcomed sinners and ate with them. They thought that he was doing a bad job of being a teacher. He was hanging out with the wrong crowd; he was socializing with bad people.

So in response to their muttering about him, he told the parables about the lost sheep, and the lost coin, and then this story today about the lost son. God's joy in finding the lost.

When I hear this story, I think about the times in my life that I've been the younger son.

- Have you ever squandered your time or money or caring relationships in dumb ways?
 - As I child I remember using my school lunch money to buy candy.
 - When we moved to California, I talked Ruth into buying a sailboat before we bought a home.
- Have you ever hurt your parents by saying or doing the wrong thing?
 - I remember my dad dropping me hints if I would like to someday take on his insurance agency – I told him: no thanks!
- Have you learned to admit when you are wrong, and to ask forgiveness?
 - When our girls were tiny, I spanked one of them thinking she had diapers on; she didn't. It was the first time I said to my kids I was sorry. I found out that saying 'I'm sorry' wasn't a sign of weakness (as I thought), but of maturity.

This story celebrates the returning home of the son. He was not disowned; there were no conditions placed on his welcome; there weren't even any questions about why he had done and said what he did. The depiction of the scene by Rembrandt shows how the son felt with that reception. Have you ever felt that level of total acceptance?

I think about the times in my life that I've been the older son. You can barely see him, lurking in the shadows of the Rembrandt painting... Now, HE is lost... He has separated himself from his brother and from his father.

- Have you felt like your hard work should be appreciated; it should earn promotions, raises, a little special attention? At my first job, all of my volunteered overtime got me in trouble. My boss took me into his office and told me to stop. I was making everybody else look bad.
- Have you felt jealous of somebody else's good fortune? (newest smart car, vacations to the Mediterranean, retirement at 50)
- Have you felt unwilling to forgive somebody? (Office wall at AMP)
- Jesus was telling the Pharisees that they were acting just like the older son; angry, resentful, and jealous that sinners would be invited into the Kingdom of God. They were saying that sinners didn't deserve a place in God's Kingdom. But Jesus saw that those sinners were learning, and changing - and accepting God.

Looking at the personality of the father, do you think he will forgive the older son?

Through the actions of the father, we are shown what is important to God. When we ask God to direct us, life changes; we are transformed. As Paul describes, we become a 'new creation'; we understand how dependent we are on God; we just want to be close to God, knowing we don't deserve anything more; and God takes us in as His children.

There is one more lesson for us to consider in this parable. First a short story...

When Ruth and I were talking about this parable yesterday, the first image that came to her mind was of our visits to her parents. We visited them every few months. When we drove into their driveway, the house door would burst open, and they would come running down the sidewalk to welcome us – starting with big hugs. This was 50 years ago; but the image of that welcome still warms our hearts.

The last lesson I want to share from this parable is offered by Henri Nouwen in his book, "The Return of the Prodigal Son".

Our task as Christians is to become like the compassionate, loving, forgiving parent of this parable. Jesus wants us to welcome everybody, regardless of the life journeys they have been on; inviting them to be one of us.

The younger son,
the older son,
the father –

these are relationships to study; to learn from; as we continue our journey through Lent.
Amen.