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Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Joshua 5:9-12, Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

March 30, 2025 – Lent 4

***Joshua 5:9-12***

***The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.***

***10While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal, they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. 11On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and roasted grain. 12The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.***

***Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32***

***Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”***

***3So he told them this parable:***

***11Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. 17But when he came to his senses [or “came to himself”] he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ’ 20So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21Then the son said to him,*** ***‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate******, 24for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.***

***25“Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ”***

Did you hear the one about the father who had two sons? The beginning of our text from the gospel of Luke, sounds like it could be the opening to a comedy routine. This passage is familiar enough to some that we may feel we already know the punch line, or in this case, the lesson.

What goes through your mind when you are listening to scripture being read, and you hear, “There was a man who had two sons.”? Do you say to yourself, “Oh, *that* one.” Maybe you tune out what comes next since you’ve heard it so much. Or “Oh, right, the story about the good son and the bad son,” the “unfair father,” or another adjective that we have learned to associate with this story. It would be understandable to do that.

A few weeks ago we read from Luke 4 that Jesus was thrown out of the temple in Nazareth and chased out of his home town. As Jesus’ reputation has grown wider more and more of those who felt threatened by what Jesus was saying set about looking for ways to accuse Jesus of something. Back in Chapter 11:42-52 Jesus cursed the Pharisees and the scribes saying “Woe to you Pharisees!” and “Woe to you experts in the law.” (the scribes) Next verse 53 says “When [Jesus] went outside, the scribes and the Pharisees became hostile to him and began to interrogate him about many things, **54**lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.” So they have been following Jesus around this whole time. The first lines of our reading from chapter 13 tell us “***Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”***

And eats with them. In that time, eating with someone didn’t refer to a quick bite at McDonald’s or a meetup at Starbucks. Matt Skinner, commentator, writes, “To eat with someone is to forge a particular bond. There is a mutual commitment that is forged around these tables. The offence [to the Pharisees and scribes] is that they don’t deserve to be with Jesus. Eating with them elevates their dignity or lowers Jesus’.” When we celebrate the Eucharist and repeat the words, “When Jesus was at table with his disciples” and invite each other to come to the table, this is the kind of mutual commitment and particular bond we are being invited to forge. In other words, according to Jewish law, what Jesus was doing, (and continues to do) was all wrong.

When the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about Jesus’ meal companions Jesus actually told them three parables, not just this one. The parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and this one, which could be called the lost son. The first two are very short and quite simple. The third parable, today’s text clearly involves much more. It’s one thing to not let one sheep go. It’s another to not lose even one coin. But to keep a person from getting lost is quite a different matter. To find and bring back a sheep, or to find and return a coin seems a simple matter. The human element, the part that makes this parable meaningful to you and me, tells us just how far God will go to not only find us, but bring our hearts back to a God-full place.

The youngest of two brothers typically would have received an inheritance smaller and later than that of an older brother. The father would have been under no obligation to give his son his inheritance early, but he did. Then in just four short verses, the youngest son found himself in deep despair. Nowhere do we find out how long the son was gone. How long was it before he had squandered all of his resources, and found himself working at feeding pigs – pigs, no less – the least kosher animal there is according to their custom. The youngest was not only in need materially, but he was also humiliated and ashamed and without dignity.

He came to his senses. Other translations read, he “came to himself.” Bishop Michael Curry says that “there must have been something inside him that said, ‘You were not meant for this.’ Curry quotes an old Spiritual that says, “There is something within me that holdeth the reign, something within me I cannot explain. All that I know is there is something within.”

This might have been sermon enough for this passage, to stop right here. We have *permission*, to change our mind. We do not have to stay on a path that our inertia and momentum and habits have kept us on. A bad relationship; bad habits; addictions; bad self-talk; bad deeds; hurting others; apathy; disregard for fellow humans; We can decide *now*, to come to ourselves. That’s good news, right there. It’s never too late. Do it.

What might hold us back? The son felt it. The shame of letting his father down. The shame of acknowledging the truth of his own lost dreams, or fantasies of the life he would have had away from home. Nobody likes to admit defeat, especially when there is so much pride at stake. The youngest son returns home, hungry, defeated. He even knows what he will say when he gets to his father’s house. He’s not sure what to expect. What he never would have expected, is what actually happened. For one thing, his father ran. Never should happen in that culture. His father saw him from a distance, and ran to greet him. No sooner had the son been able to say only a portion of his planned words to his father, ***‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*** than the father is calling for a huge party. Bring him a robe, bring him a ring, bring him sandals, kill the fatted calf!***, ‘for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.***

Wow. Just like the lost sheep, just like the lost coin, the lost was found. God will do anything to bring us back to the fold, the family.

Then why does the parable continue after that announcement of the celebration? Isn’t that the final point of the parable? Why does it matter that Jesus’ parables told to the Pharisees and scribes who started this whole thing off with their grumbling, continues with the part about the oldest son’s resentment?

Here is why I think the section headings in the Bible (not original to the text) should be open for change. This is not just a parable about a prodigal son – a son who was a prodigal – wasteful with his money – who did bad things and was welcomed home anyway. Here are some other suggestions for section headings, by some of the commentators I read this week:

 “Would *you* come to the banquet?” (Karoline Lewis)

“The Parable of Misunderstood Grace.” (Matt Skinner)

“The Lament of the Responsible Child.” or “*You’d* be pissed too!” (Rolf Jacobsen)

Rolf Jacobsen told a story of once when he was reading this parable in a class he was teaching, they had read the whole parable aloud. But instead of having time to discuss things, the bell rang for the class to be over. All the students exited except for this one young man who was just frozen in his seat. He was So Angry. He sat there and was seething. Rolf Jacoben who was relating this story, said that sometimes you don’t even have to interpret a parable for someone, you can just read it and let the parable do its work.

The reason the parable continues beyond the point when the youngest is accepted back at home, is because there is always more to the story. Jesus’ parable recognizes this. The Pharisees and scribes would completely understand everything the oldest son was complaining about. The resentment. The disparity. The blatant unfairness of having a celebration for someone who so clearly failed himself and his family by his own misdeeds. How dare his father do that! After the father has referred to the oldest as “that brother of yours” the oldest son can’t even say the word “brother.” Instead of brother, he refers to him in his words to his father “that son of yours.” It’s like a blended family, when one parent refers to one of the kids as “*your*” son or daughter. I mean, the oldest heard the party happening while he was still out in the field. Had he not even been invited?! When the youngest left home, the rules of the household were disrupted. By coming back, it’s as if the youngest was not being held accountable for any of the impact of his poor life choices! It’s unfair!

Yep. Jesus is like that. God is like that. Unfair. If God’s grace was fair and we earned it or deserved it, it wouldn’t be grace. You and I may never get to the point where we love like Jesus did, or find grace for others the way God does, but these days, the rules of our way of life are changing. If we don’t lead with love, lead with grace – assume there is reason for love and grace – we are really going to struggle.

When Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, he was forging a particular bond of care by sharing a meal. By including the oldest son’s resentment and valid feelings in to parable, Jesus was saying, I see you too, and hear your grumblings. I know the world has failed you. In the end though, Jesus will eat with tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes, and all manner of those who are wrestling with life – and will not fail us.

Let’s pray,

1<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2025-03-24/joshua-59-12-4/>

Jenista, Meg

2 <https://cepreaching.org/authors/chelsey-harmon/>

Harmon, Chelsey, March 2025

3<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-151-3-11b-32-6>

Mumford, Debra J., March 2025

4<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-joshua-59-12-6>

Safwat Marzouk, March 2025