Fourth Sunday in Lent
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; II Corinthians 5:16-21
March 31, 2019
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Luke 15:1-32

15Now 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:

"There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17But when he 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 when 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 property 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.'"

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

16From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. 17So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! 18All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

"There was a man who had two sons . . ." Uh oh. Any story that starts like that, you know that we are in trouble. Scripture and literature are full of stories about siblings and they most often are full of conflict, misunderstandings, and lots of trouble. Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers, and we're not even out of Genesis. Perhaps siblings are given to us so that we

can learn in close proximity with others, how to love one another. Maybe the assumption is that if we learn to love those we live with, we can learn to love anyone. Let me ask a question and if you want to raise your hands, that's all right. How many of you are the oldest child in your family? How many of you are the youngest? How about middle children? I guess that leaves only children, how many of those do we have? Some psychologists place a lot of importance on birth order, the order in which you came into your family. Because the experience is different for each child and the parents tend to treat children differently. Simply by virtue of being a couple's first child, a firstborn will naturally be a sort of experiment for the new parents, a mixture of instinct and trial-and-error. Perhaps this will cause the parents to become by-the-book caregivers who are extremely attentive, stringent with rules, and overly neurotic about the minutiae. This in turn may cause the child to become a perfectionist, always striving to please his or her parents. Oldest children tend to be very structured, obedient, reliable, cautious and controlling. If there is a younger child, parents tend to be more relaxed about their parenting with this child. Youngest children tend to be the most free-spirited due to their parents' increasingly laissez-faire attitude towards parenting the second (or third, or fourth, or fifth...) time around. The baby of the family tends to be fun-loving, uncomplicated, manipulative, outgoing, self-centered, and spoiled.[1] Does this resonate with your family?

Now some of us, as middle children, of course are incredibly well-adjusted and don't have any of these issues to deal with it. But in the story we read today, the issues come out. Because the older son is obviously a first-born, he's responsible, obedient, reliable; and the younger son is a youngest child, he's free spirited and fun loving. And so, I wonder where we see ourselves in this most famous of Jesus' parables. Did you see yourself as the younger child? Are you one who has had a time in your life when you have turned your back on your family and tried different things, have you even been prodigal? By the way, how many of us know what the word "prodigal" means. I had to look it up a few years ago. For a long time, I thought it meant "lost" to fit in with the previous parables of the lost

1 Voo, Jocelyn. *Parents Magazine Online, 2019*

sheep and the lost coin. Or maybe it meant "disobedient" since he was disobedient to his father. But actually, the word prodigal means wasteful or spendthrift. The problem with the prodigal son is that he wasted all his money. But then he was able to come to his senses and go back home. Or maybe you see yourself as the older child? Are you the responsible one, always doing the right thing, even though your spoiled younger siblings are wasteful and a problem to the whole family? Are you the one who is obedient even when your younger sisters or brothers are always messing up and they get forgiven, no matter what? And doesn't that annoy you? Which of the siblings are you?

Jesus tells this parable as the third of a set of three. The two we didn't read today are the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, where the owner loses a sheep or a coin, searches diligently until he or she finds it, and then calls in neighbors and friends to rejoice. These three parables are told as a response to the complaint that Jesus has been welcoming and even eating with people whom good religious people would usually shun. And so traditionally, this parable has been interpreted as the older child being the Jewish establishment, always doing things according to the letter of the law, and the younger child being those that the religious leaders were looking down upon, the tax collectors and sinners that Jesus associated with who would be considered as not deserving of forgiveness. And of course, we identify the father in the parable as Jesus who accepts us all, even the sinners and tax collectors at the set-up of the parable, who is gracious even when we have been prodigal or stiff-necked, when we have been wasteful of his gifts or unforgiving of one another. But maybe not. Maybe there's a slightly different way of looking at it.

The scholar David Henson says,

> "This story is prefaced in Luke with concerns from the religious elite about the company Jesus kept at table. This wasn't a matter of simply transgressing social norms. To the people of the time, the fellowship you kept, who you dined with, determined who you were. To the people of the time, because Jesus supped with the unclean, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the worst of the worst, Jesus, too, was the unclean, the tax collector, the prostitute, the worst of the worst. Jesus isn't the father.
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> Jesus is the prodigal.
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> He asks us whether we will accept him, even if he reeks of what we think is unwashed sin.

> He asks us whether we will embrace him, unclean and unsavory to our tastes, with the lavish grace of a banquet.
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> He asks us whether we will run out to meet him when we see him lost, alone, bedraggled, and abused; whether we will be eager and expectant to do the irresponsible thing of living out the Good News.
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> He asks us whether we, like the father in the story, have the generosity to accept him as he appears; or whether we, like the brother, will demand that God not be so irresponsible and insist that God come to us only in the ways we find acceptable."[2]

Jesus is the one who is accused of what the youngest child is accused of, right? Of eating with sinners, of living a life that is incompatible with tradition. But ultimately, this is a story of unconditional love. We are put in families, and then God gives us our church family, so that we can learn how to love. That's what this is, a laboratory of love. And the parable of the prodigal is an example of how this is supposed to work. We so often see ourselves as the older child or the younger child. I think the goal is to see ourselves as the father. Are we able to love like that? According to Paul, we are made into new people, reconciled to God, so that we can love in that way, so that we can be ambassadors for Christ, moving beyond the walls of the church, proclaiming the message of reconciliation.

Lots of you know that on the wall of my office is a reprint of Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal.* I never get tired of looking at it. It shows everything that this parable is about. Thee is a man in a great red cloak tenderly touching the shoulders of a young man who is kneeling in front of him. You can see the old man's face, but the face of the young man is hidden in the old man's chest. The younger man is wearing ragged clothes and one of his shoes is missing. The well-dressed older brother looks on with his hands folded, intentionally not reaching out to his younger brother. But most of all, like many people, it is the father's hands that hold my attention. The hands are on the shoulders of the kneeling younger son, pulling him close while the father's eyes are closed, loving this wayward child, welcoming him home, no matter what condition he is in, no matter what he has done in the past, welcoming him, no matter what.

That's the love, the unconditional love that we are called to have. Can we love like that? Can we love

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2 Henson, David. *Edges of Faith. March 7, 2013*

one another, embrace each other, no matter what we have done, no matter what? Many of you are parents and you know what unconditional love is all about. You love your children. No matter what they do, you will always love them. Some of the things they do may make you sad, but if they come to you and say, "Forgive me, I have sinned against God and against you. Can you find it in your heart to let me in again?" your hands would be as open as the father in Rembrandt's painting. That's the way God loves us. We get that from the parable. But do we understand that is also how we are to love one another? And when we have learned to love that way, because this is a laboratory of love, can we take that love out into the world and love those we encounter out there the same way. Because if we understand the lesson of the parable, when we open our arms, open our hands and embrace those who are not so clean, not so nice, not so much like us, those who have disagreed with us, those who have hurt us, those who have ignored us, those who we don't even know, when our arms are open to them, then we will find that we have been embracing Jesus. Doesn't matter if we are an oldest or a youngest or a middle. This is the ministry God has given us, the ministry of reconciliation, the ministry of welcoming home any who are lost, the ministry of acting like the father of the prodigal.
thenthen we will find ourselves embracing Jesus.