

"The Greatest Story Ever Told"
Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
March 18, 2007

*'...for this son of mine was dead and is alive again;
he was lost and is found!' Luke 15:24*

Many consider the parable of the Prodigal Son to be the best story in the Bible. It appears only in the gospel of Luke in the 15th chapter, which actually contains a trinity of parables. The first is about a lost sheep and the shepherd who leaves 99 perfectly obedient other sheep to go find the one who has wandered away. The second parable has to do with a lost coin and a woman who lights a lamp and sweeps the floor and searches high and low, even though she has nine gleaming pieces of silver tucked away safely in her pocketbook. She searches until she finds the one that is lost. Then, there is the story of the lost son, who goes away to the far country and gets into all kinds of trouble, finally comes to himself, and returns to his father who welcomes him back with an embrace, a kiss, a robe, a ring, and an exuberant celebration, much to the chagrin of the older brother, who has never gone anywhere and has always tried to do everything right.

Tradition has called this 15th chapter of Luke "the little gospel." It's all there, the essence of everything one needs to know about the magnitude and the persistence of the grace of God. Jesus tells these three parables to the Pharisees and the Scribes, who are becoming increasingly irritated with Jesus because of his – what shall we say – lack of taste. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them," they grumble to one another. Their haughty disdain frames the three stories, but an opposite mood permeates the stories themselves. The shepherd lays that lost sheep on his shoulders, rejoicing! The woman calls in her friends and neighbors and says, "Come, rejoice with me; I found what I had lost!" And the father – the father hires a band and kills the fatted calf, so that everyone may come and eat, dance, and make merry.

I am reminded of the Sunday school teacher who shared the story of the Prodigal Son with her Sunday school class of six-year-olds one day. She described in some detail the mess the younger son had gotten himself into and how the father

had welcomed him back when he returned. She said, "Children, at the end of the story there is a wonderful party with singing and dancing and lots of food. Everyone is very happy except for one character in the story. Who do you think was unhappy?"

A little girl raised her hand and said, "I think the saddest one in that story must have been the fatted calf."

I think the elder brother could have given the calf a run for his money in the sadness department. But I do agree with those scholars who suggest that a better name for this story would be the Parable of the Father's Love, rather than the Parable of the Prodigal Son, because the central actor in the story, the one who determines the outcome, is the father who welcomes, the father who forgives, the father who prefers reconciliation to retribution, the father who offers unconditional, undeserved grace.

The story must have sounded ridiculous to the first century, middle Eastern fathers to whom Jesus originally told the parable. Fathers were to be obeyed, to give their children nothing more, nothing less than they earned or deserved. Family honor was sacred. What could be more dishonorable to a Jewish family than to have a son who had gone to the far country and who had fed pigs owned by Gentiles? To them, this would have been "The parable of the Father's *outrageous* love".

There is a wonderful painting that perhaps captures a more nuanced truth about this parable. It is the famous painting by Rembrandt that hangs in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. In the painting, the father welcomes the guilt-ridden son home by laying his hands upon the son's shoulders, as his son is kneeling before him. Henri Nouwen spent weeks studying the painting, and over the course of time, his attention was drawn back again and again to the father's hands. "In the painting," Nouwen writes, "the light is concentrated on the hands, and so the eyes of the bystanders are focused on the hands. In those hands, mercy becomes flesh. Through those hands, not only the tired son, but also the grieving, worn-out father find their rest."

As Nouwen studied the hands of the father in the painting, he discovered something astonishing. "The closer I looked the clearer it became to me that Rembrandt had done something quite different from letting God pose as the wise old male head of the family. The two hands, I realized, were different from each other. The left hand that touched the son's shoulder seemed strong and

muscular, the fingers spread out covering a large part of the shoulder and back. You can sense a certain pressure, especially in the thumb. The hand seems not only to touch, but with its strength also to hold. Though there is gentleness, the father's left hand grips firmly." What a powerful portrait of a father's hand, a reminder of the importance of fathers and the need for a father's strong love in the lives of children. Tomorrow is a special saint's day for Catholics and Episcopalians. I know we're all focused on St. Patrick's Day just passed, but tomorrow is St. Joseph's Day, honoring the father of Jesus, who taught his son how to drive a nail all the way home, who loved his son with a strong, manly kind of love. A father's love.

And yet, the right hand. The right hand is different in the painting by Rembrandt; it is softer, refined. The fingers are closer to one another; they have an elegant quality. The right hand lies gently upon the son's shoulder. It appears to be offering comfort and consolation. Nouwen says that to him, it is a mother's hand, perhaps like the hand of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who loved her son with a strong, yet tender love. There is a kind of love that only women can offer their children.

One of the strongest memories I have of my ministry, which is now almost 30 years old, is from the time I served at a church downtown. My office at Central Presbyterian was just off Washington Street. Behind Central is a Catholic church -- the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. One afternoon I was sitting in my office, late. On the door to my study, the sign read *Associate Pastor*. The door flung open. Standing at the door was a desperate looking man. He looked at me, did a double-take, looked back at the sign on the door, then looked back at me and said, "Father, will you hear my confession?"

Our Presbyterian Confession of Faith captures the fullness of the nature of God. We will read these lines in a moment: "Like a mother who cannot forget her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still." The parable of the Prodigal Son is really the Parable of the Loving God, who loves us as a father and as a mother. The fullness of God.

There are three actors in the story: the father, the lost younger son, and the older, duty-bound son. Some of us identify with the prodigal. At some point in our lives, we have been to a far country and lost ourselves. Writer Nora Gallagher says that she gave up smoking during Lent. She remembers how on the Ash Wednesday of the year she quit, a friend had said to her, "Anne's giving up drinking, Terry's giving up chocolate, and me, I'm just giving up."

The prodigal son gave up on himself, but then he came to himself. He woke up, not through some dramatic religious experience, but because he had simply reached the end of being where he was. He chose to get back up and get a hold of himself, to go home, and to try to be a person who was not self-destructive.

I love this prayer written by a Nigerian Christian:

“God in heaven, you helped my life to grow like a tree. Now, something has happened. Satan, like a bird, carried one twig of his own choosing after another. Before I knew it, he had built a dwelling place in me and was living in it. Tonight, my Father, I am throwing out both the bird and the nest.”

There comes a time when we, who have been to the far country, say ENOUGH! And in the process, we find ourselves to be recipients of a healing, restorative grace we had not known existed. But first, we have to get a hold of ourselves.

Some of us identify with the prodigal; others with the elder brother, the responsible one, the duty-bound son, the one who tries to do the right thing, but for whom nobody *ever* throws a party. It is the elder brother who gets so angry over the welcoming grace the father offers the prodigal. Is Jesus trying to make the elder brother the villain in the piece? I don't think so, because if the elder brother is the villain, then most of us, most of you who are first-born siblings, for example, would be in a lot of trouble. I'm the second-born child in my family, but my parents usually treated me as if I were the first-born. And I really have, all my life, felt responsible for just about everything. I wonder if any of you can identify? If the elder brother is the villain, then who in the life of the church would be willing to serve on the finance committee? Or turn out the lights when the fellowship supper is over? The church would have to close down if the elder brother syndrome ever disappeared. The problem is that we responsible ones can get a little bit self-righteous, can we not? We think we know not only what we want to do, but what others ought to do. There is just one little step from that posture to our deciding how God ought to act, and whom God ought to favor, and whom God ought not to favor.

Peter Gomes of Harvard's University Church writes, “The poor father, he has two sons. One is selfish and self-indulgent. The other is self-righteous. Perhaps the father should run away and let the two boys fight it out.” Whether we consider ourselves to be stalwart citizens or returned wayfarers, we cannot help but receive this parable about redemption with astonished and grateful hearts. In fact, I do not believe that any of us are exclusively one way or the other.

Sometimes I am responsible, and other days I am not taking good enough care of myself. Sometimes I'm reckless; sometimes I overdo; sometimes I under-do. What this parable says is that it really doesn't matter what you do. What matters that there is nothing you have to do to earn or deserve the gracious favor and love of God. It comes from God's own heart and God's own nature. You are the object of God's gracious love, no matter what.

Our retreat leader said to us yesterday that the one thing you need to know about him was that he knew for certain that he was loved by God. To be able not only to hear that through our ears, but live that in our hearts is the most transformational thing we can undergo. It sounds absurd, but God's grace really is extravagant and utterly unrelated to whether we have earned it or not. It sounds absurd. But I'll tell you what else is absurd: The sight of Jesus, the one who tells us this story, pouring out his life, all of it. Pouring it all out on the cross for no good reason, other than love that will not let us go.

I hope you know how greatly you are loved. If you ascend to heaven, God is there. If you make your bed in hell, God will be there too. If you take the wings of the morning, and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there, God's hand will lead you, and God's right hand will hold you fast. (Psalm 139)

In the 1990's I went to China. One Sunday, I worshipped in a Presbyterian church in Beijing. The pastor of that church, interestingly enough, was a woman. It's a very impressive congregation. She is one of the leading theologians in China. Her parents were prominent members of the Communist Party, and when she became a Christian, her mother and her father disowned her. She went to California; the daughter did, to study theology. While she was there, she received word that her mother was quite ill. She called her mother in Beijing; they talked for an hour. They had a sense of reconciliation. Her mother died the next day. I was with this Presbyterian pastor 25 years after the fact, and she told a whole group of strangers this intimate story about her mother, and their reconciliation, and how that telephone call was the most grace-filled moment of her life. Then, she looked at us and said, "I became a Christian for two reasons. First, because someone invited me to go to church, and I saw how loving people were to one another. Then, someone gave me a Bible and I read the greatest story I had ever read in my life."

I have always wondered if when she opened the Bible, it might not have opened to the 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke.

While he was far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran and put his arms around his son and kissed him. 'Get the fatted calf and let us eat and celebrate, for this child of mine was dead, and now he's alive again. He was lost and now is found.'

Thanks be to God for this reading from God's own holy word.