

“The Parable of the Prodigal Son” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
March 14, 2010 – Lent 4C

This parable is one that is probably familiar to most of you, at least the basics of the story, anyway. A man had two sons. The younger, who would eventually inherit one-third of the estate, asked for his inheritance early and the father gave it to him, leaving himself and the older son to live on the remainder. According to the expectations of Jesus’ time and place, the younger son was to supposed to use his share to set himself up in life, so that he would not be a drain on the family and might even be able to contribute to its wealth. Instead, the younger son left town with his inheritance, ran off to “a distant place” and spent the money on “dissolute living.” As a result, he became desperately poor. So this son decided to swallow his pride and go home and ask to be taken on as a hired hand – a poor existence compared to the way he’d been brought up, but better by far than what he was faced with at that point. Now there was no way that he couldn’t predict his father’s response. But he had to try. So he prepared a repentant speech and set out on the long walk home.

As he got near the family home, his father caught sight of him and recognized him and ran out to meet him. He didn’t wait at the house to receive his son; he didn’t wait to hear the son admit how bad he had been; he didn’t talk about making amends or doing penance. He didn’t even require a probationary period to test his son’s sincerity. There was none of that. He just told his servants to prepare for a party, ran out the door, met his son coming along the road, seized him, embraced him, welcomed him home, draped a special robe over his shoulders and invited everyone to celebrate with them into the night. Amazing really.

And I want to stop the story here for a minute because what this tells us is something we probably all need to hear. It’s simple really. In this story, Jesus says loud and clear, “You are forgiven.” Period. No matter what we’ve done or left undone there is unconditional love, welcome and embrace waiting for each and every one of us. Now we may not have literally wasted an entire inheritance, but whatever it is, we are forgiven. And notice that that forgiveness is completely unconditional – no strings attached - which makes this message a little different than how we might have heard it spoken before. Jesus did not say, “If you are very, very good God will love and forgive you” nor did he say “If you are very very sorry for not having been very, very good, God will love and forgive you.” In this parable there isn’t time for the son to apologize let alone make right and convince the father he has changed his ways before he gets embraced out on the road. Before the son can even say, “Hi Dad” the father has his arms around him, a robe over his shoulders, a ring on his finger and a feast prepared in his honor. So, the first message for us to hear this morning is “You are forgiven.” No matter what.

Which brings us to the rest of the story, when the older brother finds out what’s going on and has a fit in which he actually lets the Dad have it. Now remember that Jesus told this story because the scribes and Pharisees were concerned about how Jesus was hanging out with sinners and tax collectors; Jesus was eating with them and talking with them and through his mere presence, he was welcoming the marginalized and sinful into the fold. And by this point in the gospel the Pharisees had seen a lot of this and were getting nervous. They had some major concerns. And those concerns were complicated. The Pharisees weren’t necessarily bad people. In fact most of

them had spent their entire lives working very, very hard to be very, very good people and by most standards, they were way better people than the younger son in the story was. They followed religious law right down to every last bit of detail in the purity code; the code which Jesus was breaking every time they turned around. And the Pharisees spent their days teaching their congregations and they had made the faith and coherence of their people their life's work.

But here was Jesus socializing with and teaching the marginalized, some of whom had never cracked open the Torah. Here was Jesus feeding people who probably hadn't washed their hands in days and wouldn't recognize a ritual if it stared'm in the face. Here was Jesus speaking God's love to people who had never done anything to earn it, understand it, or tried to break into it.

What would happen if the outsiders became insiders? If the sinners were fed, what would that mean for the righteous? If the impure were suddenly invited into the flock, what would happen to the flock and its closeness to God? The Pharisees weren't bad people, they were being "good and faithful" as they believed had been defined by God; and Jesus was in their minds completely re-defining it all. And so they were nervous and grumbling and asking Jesus a whole lot of questions. And in this parable one of the beautiful things is that Jesus didn't argue religious law (he did take care of that other places) instead, he pointed to what was probably their biggest concern of all, if all of that welcoming and forgiving and celebrating were really to happen, the Pharisees could be the ones who got lost. And so they were afraid.

They're the older brother in this story. The brother who was appalled at the whole scene. If the outcasts and sinners were received home, how do the insiders and righteous fit? Like the older brother, the Pharisees had based their reception on their own goodness and faithfulness. When it came right down to it, they might not actually have known or experienced any more of God's unconditional love than the outcasts had. And so Jesus reminded them that they weren't actually losing anything in this deal –they could be found too - the riches – the feast – the household – the celebration- had been there for them all along. And it still was and always would be. So this story is not only about forgiveness and welcome for those who have strayed. It's also about love and acceptance for those who never left. And a reminder to those older brother types that there is enough to go around.

It is possible for us all to be found at the same time. We may come to awarenesses of God's grace by different paths, but the presence of someone whose journey into grace is very different than my own, does not threaten my place at the table. The feast, the celebration is big enough, wide enough for us all. You are forgiven. You are loved. And so is everyone else.

Amen.