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Luke

## COMING HOME

I am now 4 weeks into my Lenten practice, which for me involves giving up worrying. Now when I said this to my Buddhist friend, who also happens to be our youth director, he said, “Give up worrying? Sometimes I don’t get you Christians...at least Buddhists don’t set themselves up for failure. How are you going to govern worrying? Seems pretty foolish.” Of course, in some ways he’s right...I’m kind of worried about that.

But I don’t think that a Lenten practice is about success or failure, just as I don’t think that a life of faith is best measured by the same tools we use for sporting events or board games. My practice at Lent is designed to put me in a different frame of mind. So, now when I begin to worry about something I have this little self-installed bell that goes off and I take a moment and re-think where I’m standing. It’s not that I stop worrying per se, or that I punish myself for worrying in the first place. It is just a point of consciousness that I am trying to evoke. How does my worrying get in the way of my relationship with other people, with myself and with God? What, as Jesus once told his disciples, does worrying get me? Can it add a single hour to my life? My Lenten practice is about awareness and trying to re-seat some of my natural habits so that I might engage more fully with those around me and a world that needs engagement. I’ll have no way at the end of Lent to give you a scorecard...in fact, if I did, I think I would have missed the point altogether. But faith is kind of like that...we can get caught up in the details, lost in the minutiae of “do this” or “don’t do that” and miss the mark completely. And sometimes the re-alignment that it takes to live faithfully means that we have to abandon things that are important

to us...things like pride, honor and even the most cherished of American ideals...being right. Sometimes this re-alignment will have us doing things that seem foolish.

The prodigal son is perhaps the most popular of parables next maybe to the Good Samaritan, but up in the top three to be sure. It is concise and tells a story that works from first century Palestine until 21<sup>st</sup> century Oklahoma. It is the story of forgiveness and reconciliation in a broken family. How timeless is that? Everyone has a weird family – odd and fragmented with “black sheep” and the model children. So hearing this story in the way that it is usually told is a comfort. We’re the lost and broken prodigal and God is the loving and forgiving father, waiting for us to come home. It’s a comforting rendition, and there’s nothing wrong with it. But this is a parable after all, so there is more fruit for this tree to give.

This parable should be known to us as the “prodigal and his brother” because there are two brothers here and both of them are wasteful and reckless, so we have to include both of their stories. Parables are strange creatures. Some people think that they are a very contextual thing and we can't use them anymore – we're literate and parables only work for oral cultures. I happen to think that we are still able to still connect to parables today, but we have to do so carefully because we see them through very different lenses. Parables depend on cultural hooks and these don't come from our culture. First off, we read this as an accounting of what we would call “the Gospel”...a rendering of Christian truth as profound as any other – with unconditional love as the marker of God. For the record, I'm cool with that. What I'm not cool with is portraying this as an exclusively Christian story. Jesus was not Christian, he was Jewish. And he is not making this story up, it comes from a long line of similar tales and common themes stretching back into the Semitic past. We have to acknowledge that we are stealing this story, which is a proper thing to do with good stories. This story marks the nature of God, as best we can experience it, outside the ownership of any one religious tradition. It is a Jewish story, they just happen to have a good one that expresses what Christians mean by the “good news”...the gospel...the same good news that was delivered to Israel time and again about their wanderings away from God and the love of a parent waiting for them to come home.

We think that the younger son is “bad” because he sleeps with prostitutes. That’s his big sin. But in the context of Jesus’ audience, that is way down the list. The worst thing happens first. The younger son asks his father for his

share of the inheritance. He might as well have said, “Drop dead, dad.” The whole of Jesus’ society was built more like the Godfather movies than like our own family life. Honor was the first and foremost thing and a father was the lynchpin in the whole mechanism. Honor means duty and responsibility and just as the father owes a son the promise of inheritance upon his death, so the son promises to care for that aging father until that time and to provide for the rest of the family after that time. The younger son is doing the most selfish thing he could do. We think of this as a son striking out on his own, a very American notion. They would have thought of this as cruel, selfish and even sinful. This “bad” son cares only for himself. It's about the family honor, a notion we have perhaps some vestiges of but certainly one that doesn't form the basis of our culture.

Then there's this little part – the young son ends up working with, touching and eating alongside pigs – the ritually unclean animals of Torah law. We don't think about this as a sin, just kind of gross or unfortunate. But to Jesus' audience, this young man has sunk to the very depths of depravity. He is long gone...so lost you move past pity to downright rejection. So you have one son who is lost and another who toes the line, perhaps (we infer) with silent and passive-aggressive indignation. Meanwhile there is a father who simply seems to let this all happen...and mom? Well she's not even heard from. The first century dysfunctional family...and maybe a scene some of us could point to even today.

The common link to our own dysfunctional families is shame. Although we don't have the same honor system that they did, we do still manage to have shame. How out of control are these parents? The son is destroying the family business, cutting up the family farm and cutting town to party it up. Where is the control? Have they no shame? I can imagine that people stop talking to this family, stop looking at them in the market, stop inviting them to the neighborhood parties...they shun the father, or worse yet, they pity him. What he is doing...how he is behaving is foolish. But at least he'll have retribution if that son ever comes back home. Then he can let him have it.

Meanwhile the older son keeps going. He tries to hold things together and walk with his head held high. It's no use, of course, but he does anyway. He knows that his younger brother is as good as dead. He has burned all of his bridges and the only way he's getting back “in” is if he comes back a repentant billionaire, with gifts and apologies for everyone. But he knows that he's in if he keeps working the fields, nose to the grindstone, living out his role as the first-born son...that's the key to his salvation. Keep working the system.

So this tale weaves in and out of details foreign and familiar, but the overall theme should be very poignant to us. We have three models here, but we find through the parable that forgiveness touches all of them. Both of the brothers hold their brokenness close and both sever relationship. Sometimes when I think of the younger brother I think of that Cat Stevens song "Father and Son" where the dad tries to pass wisdom gained from his experience along to his son and the son just wants to be heard. I imagine this back and forth as the precursor to the son's sinful split - his leaving punctuated with the words of the chorus "I know I have to go away".

Poet Steve Kowitz re-imagines the older brother in his poem *The Prodigal Son's Brother*. It goes like this:

who'd been steadfast as small change all his life  
forgave the one who bounced back like a bad check  
the moment his father told him he ought to.

After all, that's what being good means.

In fact, it was he who hosted the party,  
bought the crepes & champagne,  
uncorked every bottle. With each drink  
another toast to his brother: ex-swindler, hit-man  
& rapist. By the end of the night  
the entire village was blithering drunk  
in an orgy of hugs & forgiveness,  
while he himself,

whose one wish was to be loved as profusely,  
slipped in & out of their houses,  
stuffing into a satchel their brooches & rings  
& bracelets & candelabra.

Then lit out at dawn with a light heart  
for a port city he knew only by reputation:  
ladies in lipstick hanging out of each window,  
& every third door a saloon.

We get so focused on the younger son in this parable that it is easy to forget the older one. He is just as flawed. It seems like there are two kinds of "sinners" in the world...two kinds of flawed people...those who know they are and those who don't. The older brother seems to think that his righteous obedience to the rules makes him blameless. But his relationship with his father is just as broken as the younger son, just in different ways. And the foolish behavior is spread out in this parable...there's plenty to go around.

So the parable presents us with the chance to look at forgiveness and grace, but also the ways we live which always provide opportunities for either. Kowitz provides some subtext for the older brother... OK – if following the rules doesn't get you anywhere different than the guy who didn't follow the rules, then I might as well live it up, right?

Jesus tells this parable at the end of a string of three – all about the mercy of God and how God isn't the slightest bit interested in what we call honor. Jesus has a theme. And the theme is an answer to what his critics accuse him of – welcoming and consorting with "sinners", which translated more fully from the Greek means people with *hamartia*, a tragic flaw or disorder. Who doesn't fall into that category - having flaws...for they all are tragic? So really this is what I mean when I say that we're all sinners – we're all broken and flawed and have our own issues, our own ways of keeping ourselves estranged from one another and from God. Jesus flaunts those societal boundaries and keeps doing the foolish things – taking his growing authority as the new rabbi in town and squandering it by eating and drinking with sinners. These parables are foolish ones told by a fool.

Both of the sons in this parable need to come home. One is lost to a reckless life, the other to an angry, self-righteous sentence that might as well cast him off to the cut-off world from which his brother returns. He is an exile who hasn't left and this parable gives us a choice. We can choose to join the party or stand outside weakly comforted by the pale glow of our own righteousness. We can believe that God loves us not because of what we do, but because of who we are. So whether we come as repentant sinner or part of the sanctimonious faithful, we are still estranged and we still have choices to make.

I think that what Jesus is illustrating here is the unexpected amount of grace that God delivers and that such grace often encounters an unexpected foe - us. We resist this kind of forgiveness, and for good reason. It seems foolish. We want there to be justice, and we want that justice to look a lot like the latest episode of "Law and Order"...neat, tidy, resolved in about an hour (commercial breaks included) and righteous to the point of being forgettable. God's justice, however, is just a lot messier because it is not based on accuracy; it is rooted and steeped in love which, as the apostle Paul reminds us, never gives up, cares for others more than itself and doesn't hold a "me first" attitude.

God, in Jesus' parable, is willing to sacrifice all honor and substance to celebrate the human beings around him. God, in this case envisioned as a father of the

first century models, acts more like what we think a stereotypical mother would...reveling in her children and celebrating their presence as if that were enough. God, it would seem, is a bit reckless herself...only she is reckless with her love. She loves this son returned with no idea of the sincerity of his repentance - he might be more hungry than sorry. But the love is there - wastefully handed out. The ancient Jews called this love *Chesed*, the steadfast love of God for us, which refuses to let us go despite what we may do. It clings to us like a bad cold - you just can't shake it.

And here's where we can play all the roles in this drama. If we're the father, then we get to think about what that kind of forgiveness might be like. Could we forgive so wastefully, even if we didn't know that the recipient deserved it? Because here's the thing about forgiveness - it isn't for the other person. It's for you. Forgiveness is hard but it shapes our awareness too, just like Lenten practice. Not forgiving keeps that hurt and anger with you and you soon find yourself waiting outside the party stewing in your own right-ness. Forgiving works on us and gets us to a place where we can make that choice to hear God's invitation to the table. It changes our awareness.

The great Persian poet Hafiz reminds us that "nothing evolves us like love". But that love is a choice and takes effort and will and practice...and often forgiveness...of ourselves and others. Because the equation for forgiveness is the same as love - you cannot love your neighbor if you don't love yourself and you cannot forgive your neighbor if you don't forgive yourself. This is what Jesus is teaching his disciples - and that includes us too.

So we may be able to think about forgiveness sitting here in the pews...about coming home and seeing all of the examples given to us in this parable. But we will soon head out into the world. A world that is broken and needs many, many things. But I'll let you know something...there's one thing that the world doesn't need. It doesn't need more people convinced that they are right or more people made powerless by their past mistakes nearly as much as a few people willing to just be grace...wasteful, reckless grace. See, this is a foolish story - a foolish son and a foolish father making foolish decisions. Yes...sometimes that's what the Kingdom of God looks like...foolish. And sometimes foolish is a good practice.

**AMEN**