

We HAD to Celebrate
Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32
Sunday, March 6, 2016
Lent 4C
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We spent the past three Wednesdays with our friends from Temple Sinai and St. Charles Presbyterian Church looking at the book of Job. Early on, we identified that Job is like a parable, and we proceeded to look at that ancient parable from many directions while recognizing that we could spend an entire year looking at this one story and never fully grasp what it has to teach us about who God is and who we are. Parables, particularly those told by Jesus, are stories meant to be turned on their heads for the audiences. The audience assumed the tale would end one way, then the storyteller turns and ends the tale in a way no one expects—to the point of absurdity.

This morning we look at what is surely the most beloved parable that Jesus told, and we recognize that we could spend Sunday after Sunday looking at this one story and never fully grasp what it has to teach us about who God is and who we are. “For these reasons and more,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “the parable of the prodigal son stays young no matter how old it is, giving all kinds of people all kinds of ways to make the story their own.”¹

In her study of Luke 15, Taylor highlights our limitation in hearing this story from an American perspective. In our time and in our country, “there is nothing remarkable about a young man deciding to leave his father’s home, where he will never be anything but the baby brother, to go seek his fortune in the world...The younger son did what young men are born to do. He may have hurt his father in the process, but his father understood, since he probably did the same thing himself.”

To get at this story in a better way, we must understand the context of the original listening audience. “Chances are that nine out of ten of Jesus’ listeners were rural farmers, like the family in the parable. Their land was their livelihood. They received it in trust from their ancestors and they held it in trust for their children. There was no courthouse where they could record their claims to it. Those claims were kept in the memory of the community, where honor was everything. Break faith with the

¹ Quotes throughout from Barbara Brown Taylor’s “Parable of the Dysfunctional Family” preached March 18, 2007, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago. <http://www.barbarabrowntaylor.com/newsletter374062.htm>

community or lose its respect and your property lines might be 'forgotten,' just like that.

A great deal depended on being and having good neighbors...In this world, an individual had little meaning apart from his or her family. Identity was conferred in the plural, not the singular."

Taylor goes on to explain the parts of ancient patriarchal culture that are less familiar to us—"such as the huge honor owed the patriarch of a clan, and the elaborate code for keeping that honor in place. Patriarchs did not run. Patriarchs did not leave their places at the heads of their tables when guests were present. Patriarchs did not plead with their children; they told their children what to do. According to the rabbis 'three cry out and are not answered: he who has money and lends it without witnesses; he who acquires a master; he who transfers his property to his children in his lifetime.'"

She then examines a Talmudic detail that sheds great light on the son's insult to his family and the consequences should he return home. "What he does is so reprehensible that the Talmud describes a ceremony to deal with it—a *qetsatsah* ceremony, to punish a Jewish boy who loses the family inheritance to Gentiles. Here's how it works. If he ever shows up in his village again, then the villagers can fill a large earthenware jug with burned nuts and corn, break it in front of the prodigal, and shout his name out loud, pronouncing him cut off from his people."

We have this wonderful scene of the boy in absolute despair rehearsing his speech to the father in the hope of securing a job on the farm. Did he know the village would be waiting for him? If done in secret, the job on the farm wouldn't have just secured food for his belly but may have privately allowed him to work off the great debt he owed without being cut-off by the community. The father seems to want to avoid the same fate and is watching for the son. Has he been watching every day? Hoping for the child's return? Has he been tipped off that someone caught sight of the boy, so the father is in a tearing hurry to get to him first? Once the father catches sight of him, we get the wonderful image—"while he was still far off" the father sees him. And he runs. Just as the son rejected his prescribed role in the community story, the father rejects the dignified role of the patriarch and takes off running with his robes pulled up above his knees.

It is here that Taylor notes the father's desperate move and his awareness of the possibility of a *qetsatsah* response from the neighbors—"If the father can get to the son before the village does, then he can save his son from being cut off. He can save his relationship with his son and his family's relationship with the village all at the same

time. This reconciliation will cost him his honor—his greatness in others' eyes—but that is a price he is willing to pay.”

The father embraces his son, ignores the boy's apology and words of indebtedness, and immediately dresses him. The finest of clothes, the wardrobe of a man of the estate and not a servant. And the father calls for the fatted calf to be slaughtered—the biggest and best meal; “a clear sign that the celebration about to take place is not a quiet family affair but a feast...for the entire village. It is a feast to restore the family's honor, as well as a feast to restore the family's son. It is a banquet of reconciliation for anyone who will come.

And just like that,” writes Taylor, “before anyone really has time to process what a genius he is, the father throws a banquet before the townspeople can throw a *getsatsah*. The prodigal is saved, though not in isolation. He is saved by being restored to relationship with his father, his family, his clan, his village.”

In our Job study we talked about an evolution of thought or a progression in our understanding of who God is. Last week Rabbi Ed Cohn referred to scholars who said that the word on who God is in the book of Job is effectively, though not literally, saying the God of Deuteronomy is dead. In Deuteronomy there is a strong message that goodness begets blessing and sinfulness begets cursing, but Job turns that teaching on its head and shows us that life is more complicated than such neat categories. In fact, God is greater than such neat categories.

That progression of thought continues throughout scripture, and in Luke 15 we have this beautiful parable that is somewhat the opposite of Job. Instead of a blameless man who suffers greatly for no reason, we have a wandering and sinful son who deserves punishment and chastisement to the point of absolute and final cut-off from his entire community. Instead, he is met only with smothering hugs and fatted calf and a celebration of his father's abundant love. “We HAD to celebrate!” the father says. We had to celebrate because he was dead and now is alive. We had to celebrate because we had to claim him back before the village could take him from us forever. We had to celebrate because he is my beloved child. We had to celebrate because with him near us, we are whole again.

Henri Nouwen dedicated an entire book to this one parable and his personal study of Rembrandt's famous painting of the father embracing the lost son as the older son and baffled village look on. In the final pages of Nouwen's reflections, he prods us to consider that the challenge is not to overly identify ourselves in the story as one of the two brothers. Or, if you're anything like me, recognizing that we sometimes embody

both the brooding, insulted older brother and the one who is prone to wander. The real call on our lives is to outgrow the role of child and to become the parent. Our story doesn't end with returning to the path and coming home or letting go of our grudges and joining the celebration. The path continues, and the call grows, and we are called to become like the father. To be the forgiving, blessing parent. To be the one who celebrates even if it means making a complete fool of ourselves for the sake of love.

I believe this in the deepest part of my being. There's a lot that I hold tenderly or have let go of altogether when it comes to Christian tradition. I rarely feel the need to get into proof-text argument pitting one verse against another as two camps prove the god-ness of their God or the right-ness or their belief system. But one place where I will hang my hat and pull all my chips in and go to the mat and over a cliff is the great big love of God that is deeper and wider and higher than we can imagine.

I believe followers of Jesus are to be known for their love. To love in the way of the God who loves us is the command Jesus left to those who follow him. It is the great challenge of our lives because we remain stuck in the roles of the children and seldom recognize that we are capable of participating in the extravagant love of God.

The apostle Paul, who is credited with a lot of troubling things that require as much unpacking and historical critical interpretation as Job, has some of the best words about the love of the parent who watches for us while we are still far off:

I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, **17** and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. **18** I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3.14-19)

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **38** For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, **39** nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8.35-39)

THIS is the word we are called to follow before any other word. If we claim to be on the path of Jesus or near it or chasing after it or longing for it, then that path is intimately

wrapped up in the love of God. And if our lives are on or near or chasing after or longing for the love of God, then they MUST reflect that love.

If the father in Jesus' parable serves to give us even the tiniest glimpse of a Divine Parent, then we see a love that is not distant and neutral. We see that God loves God's children fiercely, vulnerably, courageously, and unendingly. May you know that love. Whether you are still far off or dutifully serving close to home, whether you have given your life to this love story over and over again or are still skeptical of its truth and your need for it. Whether you have welcomed others with the radical embrace of love or stood begrudgingly outside the celebration with judgment for how others don't measure up. May you know this love is for you. May you know that God loves you with the passion of this father. And may you know that love in such a way that you then pour it out over and over again for others. The table is set. There is room for all. We simply MUST celebrate.²

² Images borrowed from David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-4-c-the-prodigal-god/>