

Prodigal Love  
March 14, 2010  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*Your embrace, O God, is our life and our hope. We thank you for the grace that embraces us all with love. Amen.*

I admit that sometimes I kind of scan books that I intend to read, but then I never really get around to reading them. Then I think I have read them because I know the basic message and shape of the book, but I don't really have any appreciation for the richness and depth of images, language, character development, etc. I don't know if it is simply that I live my life a bit too rushed, or that I have Attention Deficit Disorder, or what. Much of my life seems to be set to auto-pilot, skimming along the surface, rather than delving deep for rich meaning.

It is easy for us to do that with much of life – books, music, visual art, but also relationships, prayer, church involvement, life transitions. We can also skim the surface of a bible story, especially a familiar parable such as today's. This morning I'd like to invite you to take the time to go deep – if only for a few minutes. Perhaps something will strike you that merits further pondering. Perhaps these last few weeks of Lent might be a time to slow down and take less for granted.

In preparation for this sermon, I took the time to read Henri Nouwen's short book "The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming." In it, Nouwen reflects upon Rembrandt's famous painting of the Prodigal Son, and how the themes of the painting and story have played out in his own spiritual life. Of course he invites us to do the same. Part of what I love about Nouwen's reflection is that he invites us to consider how we might identify with each character in the parable – the prodigal son, the elder son and the father. This helps us move past our initial reaction and interpretation of the story, which is often flat, self-righteous, and all figured out.

We know that parables don't work like that. They are not neat, clear allegories which clearly describe who is right and who is not, and then prescribe effective treatments for all who sin. Instead they seem to cast a different light depending on which way you turn them, and each time you explore them, you may take away a different message. Their richness lies in their unwillingness to be simplified, or skimmed.

We may say, "Well, clearly this parable is to teach us that no matter how much we sin, we can always come home to God." True. But that does not encompass the whole truth of this parable. It says that and even more.

If we first examine the younger son, the prodigal son, we may be able to see ourselves. We may ask, "In what ways have I squandered what has been so freely given to me?" "In what ways have I rejected all the gifts of my youth, or family, or upbringing and longed for something different?" How have I strayed and gotten lost? Maybe we have even experienced a bit of that reconciliation and homecoming – when have we been welcomed back with open arms? When

have we had the courage to admit our failings and come home? Perhaps we are just now “coming to ourselves” and realizing that we need to go home. Maybe we are finally ready for reconciliation. Are we willing to bow down in front of someone and say we are sorry? What do we hope for in response? Is it too much to hope that someone will run out to greet us and welcome us in even before we get our entire confession out of our mouths?

As John Shea describes it, they may even have been talking on top of each other:

“Oh Father,” said the son, his arms never leaving his side.

“Bring the robe,” said the Father. The servants had gathered around.

“I have sinned.”

“Bring the ring.”

“Against heaven.”

“Bring the sandals.”

“And against thee.”

“Kill the fatted calf.”

“Do not take me back.”

“Call the musicians.”

“As a son.”

“My SON,” and these words the father whispered into his ear,” was dead and has come back to life.”

“But as a hired hand.”

“My SON was lost and is now found.”

The party had no choice but to begin. (John Shea in *An Experience of Spirit*.)

Often when this story comes up in the classrooms and hallways of St. Paul’s, people immediately gravitate to the elder brother. Some identify with him simply because of birth order, they are the eldest and they know too well the feeling of responsibility, duty, obligation. But many of us think of ourselves as playing by the rules, doing what needs to be done. What if we stopped long enough to think about the elder brother as one who is self-righteous, slow to forgive, living with a mindset of scarcity? We seem to identify with the positive aspects of the elder brother – obedient, hardworking, loyal. But if we simply skim over the story, we may miss how this brother alienates himself from his family, builds resentment, and throws his own temper tantrum. How often do we choose to be right instead of in relationship, standing outside the door on our principles? How often do we play judge, deciding who is worthy of our outreach, our tax dollars, our affection? How often do we operate from a scarcity perspective that states there is not enough to go around and so you had better earn it, hoard it and guard it?

A woman came to tell Mother Macrina about a quarrel she had with a friend. She explained in detail how it came about, and how difficult her friend had been. She was sorry she got so angry, but still... Mother listened patiently till the woman ran out of breath. Then she asked her, “Why don’t you tell your friend you are sorry and be done with it?” “But Mother,” the woman exclaimed, “did you not listen to me at all? It wasn’t my fault; I explained it to you

already!” “So you did,” answered Mother Macrina. “What a strange thing it is that to say one is sorry takes only a moment, but to explain why one should not say it takes over an hour!” –Irma Zaleski in *God Is Not Reasonable and Other Tales of Mother Macrina*.

And of course, Henri Nouwen suggests that we are all called to demonstrate the unconditional love of the father in this story. Deep inside we knew this was coming – this is often the Gospel message, isn't it? Forgive, love freely, welcome home all, do the right thing, even when it is unexpected or maybe even unwarranted. Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate, Jesus tells us. We have a tendency to let ourselves off the hook on this one – to say, well that's all well and good for someone who's further along on their Christian journey than I am, but I'm still struggling with asking for forgiveness, and not being resentful. Exactly, Nouwen would say. We are called to love as the Prodigal Father loves, excessively, abundantly, extravagantly. And our only hope of fulfilling that call is to realize that we still need to ask for and accept forgiveness for ourselves, and to realize that there is no place for resentment in a kingdom of abundance. Our only hope of loving as the Father does, is to accept that we are beloved by God. And as we grow in that understanding of belovedness, then we can extend that same love to others.

For “prodigal” can mean “reckless or wasteful” and it can mean “lavish or abundance.” And as long as we think there is a limited supply of love and forgiveness, we will think that much love is wasteful and we will worry if there will be enough for us, and we will become jealous and resentful. But if we can shift our thinking to accept the fact that God's love is lavish and abundant – that there really is enough for everyone, even the really bad sinners, then there will be enough for you and for me. And then we can learn to accept our belovedness and in turn share it lavishly with others.

So stop skimming the surface of your life for a moment. Come into the deep end, where there is much rejoicing, forgiveness before you even form the words of your confession, and more than enough love to go around. Come in and get a sense of your belovedness in God. And take the time to share that love freely, even with those who don't deserve it. Welcome to the Kingdom. It's the best party around. Amen.