

Sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights by Clara Coughlin on March 14, 2010

I was on the rowing team at my college, which was in Western Massachusetts. This made training a little difficult, as most of the year our lake was frozen solid. So for spring break we would drive in a fleet of vans with all of our boats and equipment to South Carolina. One year just as classes were getting out for break we heard that there was a huge snowstorm about to hit the northeast. Our coach had already gone on to South Carolina, but he suggested that my van wait another day for the storm to pass. Well, we had just broken out our flip-flops, and we wanted to get out of New England and be sunbathing in Myrtle Beach as soon as possible. So we told him we would be fine and decided to leave just as it started to snow. So there we were, a bunch of 20-year-olds who didn't have much experience driving in the snow, in a school van that was pulling a 15-foot trailer holding the coaches' motor boat, and we were trying to outrace a storm.

Well, a few hours later we were driving down I-95 in white-out conditions, creeping along at 15 miles an hour. Every few miles we had to pull over and clean the ice off of the wipers. A number of times we had to dodge semis spinning out into oncoming traffic. We were terrified that we would skid and not be able to control the trailer we were pulling. When the car in front of us spun out, we stopped suddenly to avoid it and were hit from behind. No one was hurt, but the trailer was bent in half, and the coaches' boat got a huge dent.

We finally made it to Myrtle Beach half a day behind schedule. Our coach was standing in the parking lot waiting for us.

We were all a bit scared to get out of the van. We knew that our coach would explode at us – we had done what he had said was a bad idea and got the only expected outcome, and the boat and trailer he had entrusted us with were unusable for the rest of the training trip. We

expected him to say, “How could you be so stupid?” or “You told me you were responsible enough to handle this, but I guess you’re not” or “You’ve let the whole team down.” Yet in that moment, all that our coach did was give each of us a giant hug. What had happened was not as important as the fact that we were finally there safe and sound.

In hearing the Gospel for today, I was struck by how hard a step it must have been for the prodigal son to go home. He arrogantly rejected his father’s authority and decided that he would not regulate his actions by anyone else’s standards for how to behave. Yet he now finds himself so low that he has no option but to go tell his father he was wrong. He has every reason to believe that he will be thrown out. He rehearses a speech about how repentant he is so that maybe he can get away with getting to be a servant. It takes a lot of courage to admit we are wrong without giving excuses when we know we have done the unforgivable. Yet when we take that step, it opens up the opportunity for grace. In admitting to our brokenness we can restore our relationship with God.

The story of the prodigal son reveals the nature of God’s relationship with us. When the tax collectors and sinners turn to him, he does not berate them for everything they have done wrong, as the Pharisees expect. He rejoices because in spite of their journey they have found their way home. God is not simply an impartial judge, but a father who loves us no matter what.

This parable tells us that no matter how badly we mess up, God just wants us back. This grace is immensely comforting to us when we have hit those low points in our life. God does not love us less if we do the wrong thing. But most of the time, that’s not where we are. And it’s not very easy to accept that God does not love us more when we do the right thing. We are confronted so often with lists of things we ought to do – commandments to follow, charities to give to, causes to volunteer for. It’s hard to let go of the idea that we deserve something better

than everyone else when we actually get the tough commandments right. And when we start seeing everything as a contest for the best Christian, we lose sight of the love that inspires that obedience.

The older brother in the parable believes that the fatted calf is a reward for good behavior. Because the younger has apologized, he gets a party. Since the older son has always done the right thing, he should get just as good a reward. But here the son misses the point – the father is not intending to give out a prize at all. He doesn't respond to his older son's objections about their relative merits. Instead, he says, "Son, you are always with me" and your brother "was lost and has been found." All that matters is their presence with him. The calf is not awarded to the better brother. It is for the entire household to "celebrate and rejoice" that they are together again. And all of us get to rejoice when the community of God's people is made richer, even if we've been there first. Now, the Gospel doesn't say we don't have to bother with feeding the hungry or telling a hard truth, but it does mean that we cannot inflate our self-worth by the number of boxes we can check off. There isn't a tally for good and bad things we have done and a totaling to see who gets enough points to get into heaven. If there were, none of us would make it. We do the right thing for its own sake, and trust in God to take care of the rest.