

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

March 14, a.D. 2010

Luke 15: 11 – 32

The beloved parable of the prodigal son was spoken because Pharisees and scribes were upset with Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners. When you eat together, you are communing together, you are considered as family. If Jesus wants to commune with tax collectors and sinners, to call notorious public sinners into his family, and be one with them, then what kind of God is he?

Certainly he is not the kind of God one would expect. He acts in ways that defy our expectations and thought patterns. If you think about the characters in this parable and which of them act in ways that are expected and predictable, then, doesn't the younger son of the father come to mind? He acts in a way that young, invincible, head strong people are known to act.

First of all when he asks for his share of the inheritance, is he thinking about his father or himself first and foremost? Does he ever stop to think how his father would feel about such a rare, outlandish request? Wouldn't that make the father feel like his son loves money more than him?

Actually, the son asked for his share of the inheritance, that is first and foremost ancestral lands and possessions. That land and those possessions were gifts of God to his people. To sell them off would have brought shame on the family. To liquidate all the assets would not have left the father with much would it? Again, who and with what is the son thinking about more than anything?

Finally, it shouldn't surprise anyone that the young son didn't handle his money properly. Did he ever stop to think to give a portion of all that money back to God as a thank offering? Did he ever save any of that money for a rainy day? Think of all the good for society that could be accomplished with such a lump sum?

When his money ran out, and he couldn't buy any more wine or friends, the son has to get a job. The problem is that a severe famine has hit hard and everyone is looking for work. But this young man attaches himself to a gentile farmer to feed pigs. Now pig food, which in that place, was pods from the carob tree, was neither nutritious or satisfying.

Hungry, alone and empty, the young son thinks of home. The servants in his father's house ate better and lived better than him. Predictably, he wants to return to his father to work off his debts as a servant and pay for his meals. But this sort of action is not of faith. The son is still a long way from his father both physically and spiritually.

Now the father acts in a way that we would not expect. Farmers and land-owners in the Middle East were asked what they would do if a son asked them for a share of the inheritance while the father was still living. It was understood that such a request treated the father as if he were dead already. The response was unanimous. Each father would have beat his son and driven him away.

But not so with this particular father! He appears to be reckless and foolish when he gives in to his selfish boy. Doesn't he know that by feeding his son's lust for money, he is sending the wrong message? It is a strange unpredictable love the father has in that he would risk losing his son. By granting the strange and selfish request, the father isn't exactly showing tough love. He does what reason and experience would not do.

He forgives. Waiting for his boy to come home, he can't hold his joy on the day he sees his young son returns. He runs to greet him. No self-respecting aristocrat, land-owner or nobleman would run down the street. He puts a new robe and ring on his son and restores the boy to his place in the family without hearing of the man-made attempt to make everything right again.

Before the boy can spit out his plan, the father has struck up the band and celebrates. For his boy was lost and is now found. He was dead but is now alive. He is home again. For the catechumen, such talk of lost and found, dead and alive is baptismal talk. It echoes God's way of bringing us back home again by not listening to our foolish attempts to make everything right again, but to do what we could never do. Drown the old selfish nature and restore our place in the fathers' house as sons and daughter through a new heavenly birth.

For each baptized child of God, the Lord of the church says and promises, "I will be with you always, even unto the end of the age." For each runaway son or daughter the father waits and on the day of reconciliation, when the hostility between God and his children is hushed, his gracious heart explodes with joy and there is feasting in the house.

Now there is also another son in this parable. He is the hardworking, dependable one who will one day take over the family business. He is saving up for retirement, obedient to the father, respectful of the family's ancestral lands and customs. He is ready to care for his father and take him to all his doctor appointments and to get his groceries. These are all good things.

So what's the problem? He isn't as responsible and loving as it would appear. He doesn't speak up when his father divides the property. He fails to even attempt reconciliation between his younger brother and the father. He too is selfish but in the end is worse off than his rash and footloose brother.

Where are the boys at the end of the parable? The younger son is restored and feasting with his father inside the house, even though the young son deserves to be beaten and driven away. The older son refuses to come inside the father's house and so is on the outside, thinking that he deserves better. He is expecting a reward for his hard work and at least a little celebration with his friends.

He is offended that his father would eat with such a notorious sinner as his brother. He is far from the Kingdom of God. Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors. His father loved us so much, that he ran to carry out our salvation and made us right again by restoring us to a place at his table.

This parable is all about the heavenly father who waits for each child to come home and rejoices over you that once you were lost but are found, dead in sin and trespasses but alive in Christ, no more to die. Everything the father has is yours because of Jesus. Behold what love the father lavishes on us that we should be called the children of God.