

Lent 4, Year C
Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32
March 14, 2010

The story we just heard is among the most famous in the New Testament. It is one of three parables strung together by Luke, two of which - the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the woman searching for the lost coin - we didn't hear this morning. Together the three of them offer us the clearest picture we have of Luke's answer to the complaints that Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them", which then, as now, was something good people don't do. Just as in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, where the central figures are obviously searching shepherd and housecleaning woman, so here in this story the central figure is not the prodigal, nor his older brother, but the father who loves them both. And it is precisely that love, and the mercy and compassion which flow from it, that form the heart of the story, and gives it its enduring value to us.

The one thing the older brother and the younger have in common is the assumption that even though life in the family is a gift - you are after all born into it - you maintain that gift only by your own merit and effort. You must earn and therefore deserve your continued participation in the family. If you have earned and deserve continued participation you may feel good about yourself, if you have not earned, and therefore do not deserve continued participation, then you may feel bad about yourself.

The younger brother proves this is his perspective by what happens when “he comes to himself” as our story puts it. He prepares a speech he will offer to his father that is, in itself quite moving. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called you son. Treat me as one of your hired hands.” He has, in his own understanding of life, forfeited his right to be in the family, and therefore seeks nothing more than the wages of one of the employees. The older brother clearly agrees. He is outraged that the younger brother should be welcomed back into the family, particularly in light of his continued diligence and fidelity to the family. He has worked, he has toiled, he has labored long and hard for the welfare of the estate, and has, from his perspective, gotten nothing from it. Not even the slightest reward – say a young goat – has he ever received in recompense for his loyalty. This attitude demonstrates that he shares the younger brother’s assumption that we earn our right to remain in the family, that it is by our merit that we maintain our position.

For the most part most of us share that assumption, and we, collectively, have structured our world in such a way as to reinforce it; frankly it works at many levels. People who squander resources, don’t show up, don’t do their work generally get fired from whatever jobs they have. People who are disloyal to whatever institution they are supposed to represent find themselves ostracized. Human society can’t function without the kind of accountability that springs from the discipline imposed by the assumption that we earn our place

and maintain our right to stay on the basis of our efforts, and when that accountability is not enforced it makes lots of us angry because it is so patently unfair.

I need to say at this point that I agree with much of this. There is a sense in which accountability is crucial to the ordering of society, and the maintenance of peace with justice. Indeed it is precisely the lack of accountability that enraged the prophets of ancient Israel, and motivated much of the struggle for human rights over the centuries as a few visionaries were able to see the ways in which the people were not faithful to their own vision of what the world could be. People still argue, for example, over whether or not Nixon should have been pardoned, or Clinton impeached, but those arguments are not about whether these were good people who had been wronged, but about what the proper response to bad behavior should have been. That is why we must be careful to understand that this is not a story instructing us how to run a business, raise a family or structure a society. It is about what it claims to be about, it is about Luke's understanding of the way God deals with us, not how we deal with other.

What Luke says, astonishingly enough, is that God is not in the least like us in this regard. God is not so much opposed to as entirely uninterested in the question of who deserves what and why. God's love just is, it is there for everyone, all the time, no matter what is happening. Notice how this works in the story. The father won't even let the younger son begin his appeal for a job as a hired hand. Such an idea is dismissed before it is even presented. The father in

this story never had to decide whether or not to forgive his son for what he had done, since that forgiveness was prior to the prodigal's return. Indeed, the love and forgiveness of the father was never absent at any point; the only question was when the son would wake up to this truth.

The same was true for the older brother. He not understand that the father's love was for him regardless of what he did. His hard work was fine, even good, but that work did not move the father one way or the other in his love for that son. The father's love for the older son - as with the younger son - was prior to and heedless of anything the older brother did. It was complete, whole, entire for both siblings, and nothing either of them ever did or could do would affect this love because it was unconditional; it emerged from the soul of the father not as a response to his children, but as the truth of what that father was.

What we need to understand is that the same is true of us. Life just is, God just is, and God's love for us just is as well. There is nothing we can do to affect the reality of existence itself, and nothing we do to affect that reality of love. That can be very hard to understand. Christianity has historically fostered a strong sense that we need to behave in certain ways to earn God's acceptance. We must go to church, we must believe the right things, we must give stuff away, we must behave properly, however whatever society Christians have lived in over the centuries defines what properly is. But this, in the terms of the story we have today, is to completely misunderstand how God works. In the terms of

the story we can never earn God's love and acceptance, nor can we lose it. It is always there, always for us, always seeking us, forgiving everything prior even to our discovering that we need forgiveness. The simple truth is that no matter how hard we try we can never earn or lose what is freely given.

What we can do is to ignore that gift – that gift which is simply the “Just Is” and eternal presence of God and God's love - and so live as though it had never been given. We can do that either by squandering our own gifts through self destructive patterns of life, or we can do that by insisting that it is our own goodness, our own awareness of how we must live and what we must believe that has attracted God's love and acceptance. What we need to understand is that both brothers were ceaselessly in the presence of the father's love, and at first neither understood that, neither lived into the liberating fullness of that truth. Both were equally loved, but by the end of the story only one – the prodigal - began to see that.

This story invites us to see what the prodigal saw, that the “Just Is” of God's love is not about us, it is about God, and therefore it is eternal and unconditional. The punishment for abandoning that love is not ever that God hates us and visits upon us bad things, but that we consign ourselves to live without that love, and so inhabit a universe where our essential value, our lasting importance derives entirely from our own ability to produce. That is a lonely universe, a place where lost souls periodically bump into one another and imagine that community has been created until the moment when someone fails

to adhere to the standards and so the community grounded in merit and earned place gets shattered.

We escape that world, and its alienating isolation, only when we truly discover and fully embrace the unconditional love of God, and the “Just Is” quality of it. Only when we realize that our subjective feelings of worthiness or unworthiness are completely irrelevant to the question of whether we are loved, and “come to ourselves” enough to realize that we just are accepted, just are embraced by this God’s whose love is far more prodigal than anything we can imagine, can we then begin to live in the freedom of our full humanity. And yes it is true; you still need to go to work, you still need to take care of yourself, you still need to be a responsible citizen. But you don’t need to imagine that the “just is” of life, and the presence of God’s love is in any way affected by any of those things.