

St. Paul's Congregational Church
March 31, 2019
2 Cor. 5:16-21; Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is always so much more in a parable than we realize – there are so many layers. Jesus told these stories of real people, real life situations to show his followers, us, of God: God's love, of what God's realm looks like. These stories help us enter the mystery of our faith, help us to know the unknowable God, help us to find our place in God's realm.

The parable we encounter today, "The Prodigal Son", is the longest in the Bible - let's enter the story of these three characters: the younger son, the elder son, and the father and see where it takes us.

The younger son asks his father for part of his inheritance early – not all that unusual an event for that time, or for ours, for that matter. We borrow on our life insurance, raid our IRAs to perhaps buy a house – we use a future asset now in some ways.

So the younger son leaves home and spends and spends and spends – and loses his inheritance. We don't know how, really; all we're told is that it's squandered through bad living. We bring our own ideas to what that means – I'd think many of us see him as reckless, wasteful, irresponsible, selfish. And that does color the way we see the rest of the story. What we do know is that he lives in poverty, becomes a swineherd of all things - we watch the younger son in this parable lowering himself to the ultimate degradation for a Jew of his time; to live among pigs. In the eyes and ears of Jesus' Jewish listeners, nothing was dirtier than dealing with pigs.

At some point he wants to come home to his father, not as a son, but as a hired hand: here I am living among pigs while even my father's servants have enough to eat.

So he comes home and his father throws a huge banquet.

Then there's the older son – he stays at home, works hard, doesn't waste his inheritance. But he's never received such an honor, such a party. When his brother returns home to such a welcome, he cries, "It's not fair!" Maybe we don't disagree with him – maybe we feel a little sorry for him. We can understand how he must feel.

But the parable tells us this is a story about a man with two sons – it's interesting, isn't it, that this story has come to be known as the prodigal son, not the forgiving father. The father who shows consistent openness,

forgiveness, joy, generosity, steadfast love. A father who had two sons, loved two sons, was generous to two sons, reassured two sons.

Where is it that you enter into this story today? With the younger son who leaves home testing his wings? With the older son who works hard, stays safe at home? With the father?

Perhaps you enter as a parent who tries hard to be fair, to treat your children equally, a parent who sometimes thinks, no matter what I do, it's wrong. It's not enough. The pain of seeing children feuding, at odds with each other, jealousy, anger, refusal to participate in family, community gatherings. Sound familiar? Maybe so at one time or another.

And we understand the complaints of the older son – I've stayed home. I've worked hard for my father. I've stayed out of trouble. My brother doesn't deserve all this celebration. He lost his inheritance in reckless living. Where's his sense of responsibility? What's the matter with him? I never did anything like that.

I think, though, from the text, that the younger brother might have agreed with him – no, he didn't deserve the party. He came home begging for mercy, not to be accepted as a son, but as a hired hand. At least then he would have food to eat. He never gets the chance to tell his father all that though, does he – when he starts to talk, the father interrupts him through his joy. The lost has been found. We are reminded that Jesus continues to search for the lost and rejoices when the lost are found.

I wonder if part of our difficulty with this story is our own sense of competition rather than cooperation. Our belief that if there are winners there must be losers. We sure hear that these days don't we in the bitter and nasty rhetoric we hear all too often. Put the other guy down. Build myself up. Gotta be a winner no matter the cost.

I love the March madness of college basketball! Intense competition, heart stopping moments as but one of the teams can win. I certainly felt that Friday night during the UCONN game – UCLA gave UCONN a real battle – and even though I've been taught good sportsmanship – it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game – well. I wanted UCONN to win! A good game wasn't enough – the closeness of the score tells you it was a good game, but I wanted the win! And that meant UCLA had to lose. An either/or situation.

But this parable teaches of the both/and. This story teaches compassion and joy and reconciliation. The father's motive is compassion, not competition. And neither brother could see that, could he.

We live intensely competitive lives – our whole sense of self is built upon the way we compare ourselves to others and upon the differences. I've

come to believe that pervasive competition can prevent us into entering into solidarity with others, it can stand in the way of being cooperative, of being compassionate. To be compassionate we have to give up some of our identity, break down dividing lines. To be compassionate is to begin to merge our own self with another. And that's in direct violation of our learned cultural belief that the self is an autonomous unit.

We are all united under the love and care of a God who wants more than anything else for us to be reconciled, to be in relationship – with God and each other. We learn through these trying times that the love of God in Christ does not wipe out our sense of self but wakens it, heals it, brings it to heights we never dreamed possible.

God is making the invitation to feast and celebrate and grow. We often think of praising God but how often does it occur to us that God is praising us – delighting in us - we who are God's creation! Remember on the 7th day of creation when God said, "It is good."

Jesus is asking us to be as close to each other as God is to us. God's compassion is compassion without competition. We're called to give up our competitive selfhood, called to give up clinging to our imaginary distinctions. We're called into the mystery of the Christian life, to receive a new self, a new identity that depends not on what we do or achieve, but on what we're willing to achieve: we're called into a new creation: compassion, reconciliation. We're called into a ministry of reconciliation – each and every one of us – called to welcome our brothers and sisters home. Called to draw together those who are out of contact.

Back to our story: about a father whose embrace of the younger son did not mean rejection of the older son. The father in the story offered no moral judgment – he simply reminds him, all I have is yours. There is unbroken closeness between us.

The father reminds us of how God relates to us: an openness. We have the freedom to say no as well as to say yes to God's call. Forgiveness: God's forgiveness is always available to us – along with generosity, steadfastness, joy: each of us is welcomed home with the same joy, the same hospitality, the same banquet in community.

The sons show us how we humans relate to God: the younger son reminds us of those marginalized. They are the "other". The elusive "they" who are different – they who are cast out, cast aside, they don't "deserve." The elder son reminds us of those concerned with proper religion and behavior – neither one of the sons fully experiences the love and generosity of their father.

But we know the younger son repents, comes home begging for mercy, asking forgiveness. We know that the father interrupts him and moves to restoration of relationship. We don't know what happens to the older brother, though, do we. We do know that both brothers are surprised by their father's reaction.

Surprised by grace? Grace – is it fair? On whose terms? We're called to a new creation here – the self is now called away from where we are to where God wants us to be. Called into the joyful establishment of a new sense of God's goodness, called into a stronger relationship with others and with God. No longer lost. No longer alone.

Are we brave enough to be as the younger son who realized what he'd lost, strong enough to confess our wrongs, and turn toward the father who will always receive us back with celebration and joy? Can we put aside our feelings of "it's not fair" and share the banquet of reconciliation, of welcome? Can we take the risk of setting aside our jealousy, our anger, and attending the banquet ourselves, secure in the never ending love of God? Can we let go of the spirit of competition and enter into a spirit of compassion?

Today in a country that is bitterly divided, at a time when hatred seems to be winning over love and where hostility works against reconciliation, can we move as true ambassadors for Christ to spread the good news of God's embrace for all of God's creation and created beings.

This is a parable about love, forgiveness and joy. Enter into the story where you may. Take from it that which brings you healing – not necessarily comfort but healing. Come home. Be found. And then let us welcome each other home, without strings, with forgiveness, with compassion, with a sense of joy. We who were lost can be found. And our God will meet us with openness, forgiveness, generosity, steadfastness and love and give us the strength and courage to respond to this gift of the ministry of love, compassion, and reconciliation. So may it be for all of us.

Let us pray: Today we remember, God, that you have never quit on us, that you have never given up on us. Your love for us is infinite in its capacity. Your patience is timeless in its duration. Your readiness to forgive, to welcome back, to celebrate relationship is constant.

Remind us that apart from you we can do nothing; that cut off from your Spirit we cannot endure, that as we drift away from you, our access to your renewing strength is diminished. And remind us, too, that our greatest joy is in the service we perform in the name of your eternal love. We are commissioned, O God, to be as you are: compassionate toward those who have come from afar seeking forgiveness and restoration to community.

Grant to us the wits and the words to speak blessing and welcome even when the world would spurn, that your forgiveness may be made visible and that your love may be shown forth in all its power to the world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.