

“Welcomed with Open Arms”

Wildwood Mennonite Church

Lent 4 - March 31, 2019

The trouble with sermons, and with sermon-writing in particular, I've decided, is that they have the uncanny tendency to hold up a mirror to ourselves. Have you ever dressed to go out, felt good about yourself all evening, then come home, looked in the mirror and discovered you have a huge zit on your nose? Or have had soup spilled down the front of your shirt that you never noticed till you got home? Or like one woman I saw, realized there is a bra hanging by its hook on the back of your sweater? Perhaps she needed a *rear-view* mirror! Have you ever discovered that how you *actually* looked was mortifyingly not how you *thought* you looked?

Studying a parable can be like that. We may have certain ideas about who we are and how we operate in the world – and then along comes a parable and blows all of that out of the water. Sometimes it's not pretty!

In our gospel lesson today, we have a parable often known as the story of the Prodigal Son. It is a parable found only in the book of Luke, and I understand it is one of two best known of all Jesus' parables - the other being the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is also considered to be one of the most profound, in fact it has been said to be the greatest short story ever written.

Oddly enough, despite being one of two most well-known parables, it is also one of two least liked – and I wonder if one reason may not be because it powerfully holds a mirror up to ourselves. What we see is not what we *thought* we would see or had *hoped* to see!

At any rate, in doing a bit of exploring, I discovered that in those days it was not unusual for a son to receive his inheritance early. Early retirement is apparently not new to our generation! Even in those days, if the father decided he wanted to let go of the decision-making and management of his property, he was free to disperse the inheritance, but in the following way: If there were two sons, as in today's story, the eldest son received 2/3, and the younger son received 1/3. Those were the laws and everyone knew how that worked.

So, the problem in this story is not that the younger son wanted an early inheritance. I learned a Greek word this week and that is “ousia”. What the younger son asked for was “ousia”, which means that he is asking to live his own life, independent of his father – cut off from family and any acknowledgment that he would be beholden to anyone. Younger son is cocky, confident, arrogant. He looks in the mirror and *thinks* he sees a self-reliant image; he thinks he can be the best tender of his own life and resources. He wants to do with *his* life and *his* money what he pleases, and thinks he can trust himself more than his own father.

Somewhere I heard a story of teenaged daughters who claimed they had the right to make their own choices and do with their lives as they pleased. “It's my life!” they

claimed! To which their parents responded with a few questions: Who had *given* them life? Was that their own doing? Who had fed them, sheltered them, taught them? How was this now entirely their *own* life?

But in our parable, the younger son assumes this is *his* life – and he wants complete independence. Inevitably, the gift not acknowledged becomes the gift that is misused. Inevitably this misuse leads to loss of integrity and to personal humiliation, because the son has asked for the wrong kind of independence.

We too can try to live our life autonomously and apart from others and then run into trouble in our independent lives. And we may not recognize that until we take a long, hard look into the mirror and realize that what we have, be it physical features, spiritual qualities, emotional attributes or informed minds – that *all* we have is inherited or nurtured or informed by another in some way, and that our lives truly are not our own.

We are dependent on one another, but more importantly, we are dependent on God. So this is where I run *myself* into trouble, is in doing things independently (or at least trying to), and in thinking that I don't need God; thinking I can manage my life quite independent of God, thank you very much. Some of us no longer think of God as our provider in all things because we think we have it all covered.

Some say the opposite of faith is self-sufficiency. Why are we surprised when that doesn't work?

So, second son travels to a distant country where he squanders his property in dissolute living. There follows a famine, he decides to slop hogs in order to survive, and eventually becomes so desperate that he decides, despite the utter humiliation, to return home on his knees, recognizing that even a hired hand's life at his parent's home would be better than where he's at right now.

Perhaps the younger son is simply desperate, but perhaps the younger son has looked into the mirror and seen clearly what he has done and who he has become.

As you know, there are two sons in this story – and the second son we meet is the elder. No matter where we fit in our own family birth order, when we look into the mirror, we may see our own faces here as well.

The elder son has been working hard in his father's business. He has put blood, sweat, and tears into it. Angry with the younger brother who has left him to carry the whole load of responsibility, which if truth be told, he might have taken on himself anyway just to be sure everything was done properly, his annoyance has been growing daily, not that he'd admit it or even recognize it. In his relationship with his father and his father's business, he has substituted obedience - a strong sense of duty and obligation - for love. He sees himself as unselfishly sacrificing through a life of service, and compared to that younger brother of his – well, clearly, he himself is beyond reproach! He wasn't the one who ran off! His brother had likely squandered everything he had! Who knows what the younger brother was up to in the city, with all it's worldly temptations! He may have tried every temptation available! He feels quite sure his younger brother *quite likely* tried them all!

There's a certain arrogant superiority in the elder son here – someone who sees himself as worthy and wonderful and better than everybody else. There may even be a tinge of jealousy regarding the younger brother's freedom, but when the elder son looks in the mirror all he sees is perfection. He has lived according to the rules; he has done it right!

I must say that in seminary my poorest marks were in Church History, but I do remember that there has been some reference to and concern for maintaining a pure church – a church which in true elder brother form thought that by strict rules as to who was in and who was out, could maintain what they thought was purity. Back in the day, I hope a very long time ago, shunning was practiced in Mennonite communities, in which a former member was avoided in every way possible, and excluded from both the church and community. It is not that long ago, i.e. within *my* lifetime, that a dear friend was excommunicated from their church for marrying a Mennonite and not promising to raise their children in the traditional church. Devastating! The concept of the pure church, sadly, is still alive and *unwell* today, and this arrogant, unforgiving approach begins not in our society, but within *us*, within our own individual hearts.

Sometimes if we don't like somebody or approve of somebody, we don't want our friends to like that person either. When we're not prepared to forgive, we certainly don't want others inviting them in to the feast. Sometimes we like to make rules about who's in and who's out, and we don't like anyone else messing with our rules! In an article called, "Hospitals, not Country Clubs: Churches without the Broken are Broken Churches", Ed Stetzer writes, "I've been fascinated by the fact that a lot of Christians don't seem to like non-Christians – otherwise known as "the lost" or the "unchurched" or whatever term you might want to use. They want to keep away from the messy people – perhaps missing the obvious, that we are messy as well." ¹ (unquote)

So, sadly, when we remember to take a long, hard look at ourselves in that mirror, we may see something of ourselves here as well: At times we, too, can be unforgiving, unloving, unwelcoming.

When I was young, I had an aunt, one of my father's older sisters. who was a single woman living in a house she described as a shoebox, because it was so small. Unlike some others in the family, she never carried a chip on her shoulder. In those days we didn't drive in to Saskatoon very often, but when we did, we would often drop in on her for a visit. Whether she was expecting us or not, she must have been sitting by the window because it seemed she would always see us before we got to her door. I don't recall ever standing on her front steps and knocking, waiting for an answer! Never! Instead, as soon as our car was stopped, it seemed, she would practically come flying out of the house, arms outstretched, crying, "Wheeeee!" in a high-pitched voice that left no denying she was excited to see us and ready to welcome us in. And always, in my memory, as if by magic, she was ready to prepare a feast for us! As well, she was a most generous woman and would often have a gift for my brother and I - some toys or records she had found on sale somewhere and thought we might enjoy.

¹ <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/176725-ed-stetzer-hospitals-not-country-clubs-churches-without-the-broken-are-broken-churches.html> – accessed online Mar 31, 2019

So. Enter the Prodigal Father! Did you know that prodigal means reckless or extravagant? I admit I did not! The son has been extravagant and reckless with his inheritance – while the father is extravagant and reckless with his love! Anyway, this parable, otherwise and better known as the Parable of the Loving Father moves the focal point back to center, because it tells us, not so much about the sons' sins, as about the father's love. It tells of a parent who has been waiting, aching, yearning for the younger son to come to his senses, to "come to himself" as some translations say, to become who he was meant to be and who he truly is at his core.

This father sees his son coming from a long way off. Perhaps he recognizes the walk, the sagging figure slowly coming toward him. Perhaps he just KNOWS that this is his younger son! How long has he waited, working with one eye always on the road, waiting for this moment? The father's heart "fills with compassion"! To use one of Tom's descriptive words from the children's story last week, we can almost feel the "WHOOSH!" of compassion and love and joy that fills and stretches his rapidly-beating heart.

Despite the fact his mobility is not what it used to be, the father hurries forward – and as they come together, he spreads his arms and throws them around this son who has returned, kissing him and holding him tight as though he never again will let him go.

With his head on the father's shoulder, and tears streaking muddy paths down his dusty face, the son cries, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

The father barely hears him. He turns to the slaves who have followed, and says, "Let's get this boy cleaned up! Quickly, bring a robe – the best one! Put a ring on his finger to show he is mine. Hired hands don't have shoes, but my son will wear shoes. All my children (have) got shoes!"

The father can barely contain his excitement! "Serve up that calf we've been fattening! It's time for feasting! Put on the music! It's time for dancing and celebrating! For my son was lost and now he's found! He's returned! He is alive! Now is the time for a bountiful feast and celebration!"

In telling this parable, Jesus is telling us about how God, our Creator, our heavenly parent, feels whenever one of us "comes to our senses", comes to our real self, as we have been created to be. We can easily lose that real self somewhere along the way, it seems. As we journey through life, some experience, some trauma, perhaps, causes us to feel disillusioned with God and with life itself, feeling that no one, not even God, is to be trusted - certain that we'd do best just to manage what we can on our own. That may not even be a conscious thought, but it can be there none-the-less. Certainly, we think, God doesn't understand our life situation, or how we're feeling right now, and we assume, even if we haven't lost faith *entirely*, that God probably doesn't much care about us or even notice we're here. This is where our minds can go.

It seems, strangely enough, that many if not all of us have to go through a period of doubt and disillusionment, and even hit bottom before we can begin to understand the

deep, deep love that our Creator has for us! Sometimes that understanding is very hard to come by, especially when God feels so far away.

One of the options for the children's story for this morning, ended with the words, "Even though we can't see God, God gives us many people in our lives who love us. Their love helps us to learn what God is like. We need each other to learn to know God." That is a lesson, not only for children. We all need each other, we need to be *inter-dependent* – and sometimes it is children themselves who teach us best about the unconditional love of God.

WE... can never give up our "ousia" or lose it, for no matter how far we may wander, we will never be cut off and alone; we will always remain God's children. Perhaps we can learn to remember our focus statement for this morning which is, "When we are lost and far from God, God reaches out with open arms. We get up and enter the feast of reconciliation."

Although I first saw that "getting up" was an action required on our part, perhaps it means, simply, that we get up off our pleading knees, out of the hole of shame we have let ourselves sink into - and give ourselves permission to accept and enjoy the feast God has prepared just for us, remembering that God takes great joy in our return, our turning back – and reaches out, welcoming us with wide-stretched open arms!

God is never more delighted than when we come to ourselves. Thomas Keating claims, "Our greatest accomplishment in life is to be what we are, which is God's idea of what [God] wanted us to be when [we were] brought into being.... Accepting that gift is accepting God's will for us and in its acceptance is found the path to growth and ultimate fulfillment."²

I will close with the words of Henri Nouwen who says, "We must dare to opt consciously for our chosenness and not allow our emotions, feelings, or passions to seduce us into self-rejection." And my favorite quote, words that have carried *me* across the desert and words I have repeated to others many times, "The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace."³

Prayer:

God, you are our loving parent, and even though at times we feel like the child who has run way from home, or the one that thinks that doing things right will win us favor with you, you love us all, each and every one, waiting for us to look at ourselves in the mirror and see ourselves as you see us, with your heart filled with compassion and love and delight. For this we are grateful beyond words – and we pray that we may be filled with that same love and compassion for all we meet. Amen!

² Quoted in Kidd, Sue Monk. "When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions", p.147-148.

³ <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/867497>