

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2013

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
LUKE 15:1-3, 11b-32

THE TALE OF TWO SONS

Back on Ash Wednesday, I invited all of us to consider giving up something for Lent, namely giving up holding grudges. One the three Sundays since, I've reflected on temptation, sin, and suffering. Lent is a time for "heavy lifting" spiritually, to reflect together on tough, important things. Today, the focus is on **grace**.

The Episcopal Catechism (on page 858 in The Book of Common Prayer) defines "grace" as "God favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts and strengthens our wills." We can see *all* of these aspects of grace operating in the life of John Newton, the man who wrote the great hymn "Amazing grace" [just sung as the Gradual Hymn at the 10:30 service]. He knew personally what forgiveness of sins meant, because before he came to know Christ he was in one of the worst professions in the history of the world: he was a slave-trader. He knew personally what God enlightening his mind meant, because he came to understand that he had to *stop* being a slave-trader because the slave trade was *wrong* -- not just for him but for everyone. There were very few whites in the world who believed that in the late 18th Century. God stirred his heart to become the expert witness for the anti-slave trade lobby in London, and God strengthened his will to persevere in that struggle for years against the forces of wickedness.

The hymn that he wrote is a testimony to the potential for change in every person, and *his own* inspiring, radical life change by the grace of God is why, I have been told by a member of this congregation, John Newton's house has been preserved where he did his slave-trading, in Sierra Leone. If *he* could change so thoroughly, anyone can change, by the amazing grace of God.

Of course, grace is our theme today because of today's Gospel. Now today also happens to be the day we are celebrating Girl Scouts, but since I did not write my sermon with scouting in mind on the Sunday we honored Boy Scouts, I will reference both kinds of Scouts today. How many people here this morning are having or have had some experience with Scouting? [Show of hands.] O.K., you will hear some terms which may

sound familiar to you; feel free to respond when I ask you to, and the rest of us can be coached by you and join in.

Today's Gospel story is one of "Jesus' greatest hits", one of the "most downloaded" of all of his stories. It's usually called "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," focussing on the son who left home, but I like to refer to it as "The Tale of Two Sons." Today I'd like to reflect on the behavior of *both* of the sons in this story, not only on what they do, but on where each ends up. What *values* did each of them live by during the story -- and when the story as we have it ends?

The story is set in the Palestine of Jesus' time when the few people who had wealth almost all had it in the form of land, usually farmland. The father in the story had "property", and his wealth was not in the form of bank deposits, stocks, bonds or mutual funds which could be easily transferred to another person, but in the form of farmland on which the family was living and which provided them with their jobs. It's important to remember that as we walk through this story.

Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that *will* belong to me.'" Now when, in the normal course of events, would the family property be owned by the two sons instead of by the father? [Responses from the congregation.] Right, when the father *died*. So the story *starts* with the younger son saying, "Dad, I want my inheritance *now*. *I'm tired of waiting for you to die*. Sell part of our family farm and give me cash to do whatever I want with *now*."

What do you think of this son? [Responses from the congregation.] Now, let's think about his behavior in terms of Boy Scout values. Was the son loyal? [The congregation responds, "No."] Courteous? ["No."] Obedient? ["No."] Kind? ["No."] Friendly? ["No."]

What would you have done if you were the father?

The father had choices. The father could have told the son to "take a chill pill," respect his elders and wait. The father could have kicked the son out of the family and exiled him. But he didn't. Jesus simply says of the father, "He divided his property between them," the two sons.

Jesus continues, "A few days later, the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living."

Sounds like he went to somewhere like Las Vegas, where certain things in addition to gambling are legal which are not legal in most places; that's spelled out towards the end of the story in the comments of the older son.

Was the younger son trustworthy? ["No."] Thrifty? ["No."] Brave? ["No."] Reverent? ["No."] Helpful? ["No."]

Jesus continues, "When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into the field to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything." Remember, this story was first told by a Jew to other Jews: where does slopping hogs rank on the list of jobs which an observant Jew would be willing to take? [Responses.] Right, at the bottom. But, was he cheerful? ["No."] And -- remember, his job was slopping hogs -- do you think he was clean? ["No!"]

Somehow, I have a feeling that this guy was *not* an Eagle Scout. I took the 12 qualities of an Eagle Scout right off of an Eagle Scout award program, and at this point in the story the younger son is 0 for 12. Have any of you ever brought home a Report Card with a Zero on it? [Responses.] This guy had a big zero on his report card half way through this story.

Girl Scouts: *at this point in the story*, has this young man "done his best to be honest and fair, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong, responsible for what he says and does?" ["No."] Has he "respected himself and others, respected authority, used resources wisely, and made the world a better place?" ["No."] No, I don't think so either.

If the story ended here, would this be the sort of person you'd like to imitate? Ah, but the story doesn't end here, does it? You see, people sometimes get going in the wrong direction in life. But God has hung up a sign on the road of life which says "U-turns are always permitted."

The key phrase in Jesus' story is the very next one, referring to the younger son. **"But when he came to himself."** We could say, "The light bulb over his head went on, and he realized what a jerk he'd been, and he decided to change." That would be accurate. Or we could say, as people in Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step groups say, "He hit bottom." That would also be accurate.

But Jesus' phrasing is really interesting. Jesus says, "When he came to himself." Jesus assumes that there was a *good person* "inside" all of that bad *behavior*, and that the good person deep inside was the *real* younger son: "he came to himself."

And when the real, good person "came to himself", he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

Meanwhile, let's think about the father. What has he been doing all this time? Well yes, he's been running the family farm and hanging out with his older son, but in relation to the younger son he has apparently been "doing nothing." That can be one of the hardest things for a parent to do. Sometimes, it's also one of the most important things for a parent to do. Speaking as a father myself, it's tempting to try to "fix" everything for our kids, and to spare them "the school of hard knocks." But do you think the younger son in this story would have been helped by that? Do you think the younger son would have responded well if the father had abandoned the family farm and come looking for him?

Let's remember, this *is* just *one* of Jesus' stories. In another story, Jesus says that the Good Shepherd does go looking for lost sheep. But in *this* story, the father seems to know that his stubborn, full-of-himself younger son is going to have to figure a few things out on his own -- if he will *ever* figure them out at all. So, to use an Alanon phrase, the father embraces "detachment with love," and let's his younger son "hit bottom."

Let's pick up the story from there. "So [the younger son] set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Once the father sees that his wayward son has done a U-turn, he meets him half-way. And not only that: he listens to his son's confession of sin -- but doesn't allow him to continue with his plea to become a hired hand. The father restores to the younger son the symbols of his sonship. **He forgives him fully.** The younger son is a member of the family still, and always. By grace he has been saved, through faith.

But that's also not the end of the story.

There is the older son -- the guy who stayed home, worked hard, “colored between the lines” -- *and was filled with resentment the whole time*. He doesn't even acknowledge that his brother is his brother in conversing with his father -- he refers to him as “this son of yours.” And this is the *older* son -- whose inheritance, under First Century Palestinian law, would be *2/3 of the estate, not half* -- and *everything* that's left. He begrudges the father throwing a welcome-home party to his own brother, perhaps because the costs of the part are coming out of his share of the estate of his, ahem, very much alive father. Who has the attitude problem now?

We don't know how the story really “ends”, do we? We don't know if the older son ever comes to his brother's welcome home party or *if* he is reconciled with his father, or rather if the older brother has a “pity party” by himself for the rest of his life. Or maybe longer...

But we do know that *one* “brother was dead and has come to life, he was lost and now is found.” Which brother was following Scout values -- and Christian values -- at the *end* of the story?

And aren't we glad that God is like the father in this story: giving us freedom, letting us accept responsibility for our own behavior -- or not -- and if we accept responsibility for our own behavior and we realize that we've messed up, then accepting our confessions, forgiving us and reminding us that **we are always God's children**. And God also reaches out to us with compassion if we ever create “dungeons of resentment” for ourselves, as the older brother did, and God hands us the keys to get out -- *if* we decide we want to.

U-turns in life are allowed by God. If we're going wrong, we can turn around and do the right thing. And if we think we're the only one who's doing things right, we can really mess up by clinging to a bad attitude and end up going in the wrong direction at the end.

When we live the story of our own lives, let us remember this “Tale of Two Sons” -- and remember how gracious, merciful and loving God is toward us, and how much freedom God gives us, and all people. Let us use our freedom well.

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