

Fourth Sunday in Lent Full to the Brim: Prodigal Grace

Scripture: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (Dorothy Booker-Tymchatyn – communion table)

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

So he told them this parable:

Then 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.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 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 to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he 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.’ ” So he 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. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate. ‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

Reflection (Laura - Pulpit)

“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.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country,”

The image you see here is a copy of Rembrandt's painting called the "The Return of the Prodigal Son". Much of what you will hear me share with you this morning comes from a book by Henri Nouwen with the same title.

So I invite you to look at the image. Pay special attention right now to the son who has returned on his knees, being embraced by his loving father. Notice his shaved head... his tattered clothing... his worn shoe and his bare foot.

This is the return of the prodigal son. But before this returning there had to have been a leaving.

Have you ever felt like leaving? you know.. just running away? from work, your family, all your commitments, your church?

Or maybe you've felt like running **to** something... something bigger, better, more exciting than what you already have? A desire to see more of the world... to cut yourself loose from a particular way of living, of thinking... of being? A desire to rebel over the way things have always been?

Nouwen suggests that this desire to leave is a searching desire.

The prodigal son was searching for something and he thought he could find it in the distant country land.

So what was it that he was searching for?

I wonder if he was searching for home? Not a structural home.. he already had that... another kind of home... the kind of home that can only be found in the heart of God.. can only be found when we believe... with every part of our being... that we belong to God and that God holds us strong and safe in an embrace that never ends.

This home is not far away... This home is in the centre of our being. Its the place where we can hear the voice that says, "you are my beloved child".

Listen now... can you hear that voice?

If you're anything like me, it's a voice that can sometimes be awfully hard to hear. It's a soft and gentle voice that speaks to our inner being.

Now I can be pretty dense at times... so what I really need is a loud, gong-like voice calling me to attention... shouting in my ear. A voice that says something like, "YO... Laura! I'M RIGHT HERE!!!

But... God's voice does not force itself on others.. it doesn't demand attention. It's a voice that can be heard only by those who are willing to allow themselves to be touched by God's love.

So how in the world are we supposed to hear that voice when there are sooo many other voices... voices that are loud.. gong-like. Voices shouting at us... so full of promises of something better... something bigger... and those voices can be very seductive. They say “come on... keep searching... what you really need is to prove that you’re worth something”

These same voices try to convince us that we need to earn love.. they want us to prove to ourselves and to everyone around us that we are worth being loved... and they keep pushing us to do anything and everything possible to gain acceptance.

We are the prodigal son every time we search for home in people and places where home can not be found...ignoring the place of true love.

So why in the world doesn't God just keep a tighter grip on us? Maybe put one of those wrist things on us like parents put on their little ones in the mall so they can't get away? Why doesn't God just get some of those?

God doesn't work like that.

God loves us all so much that we are free to leave home at any time.... just like the prodigal son.

This story in Luke goes on to say... “When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout the 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 to his friends to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough 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’” So he set off and went to his father.”

Rembrant in his image leaves little doubt about the condition of this son. Just look again. Beyond the physical appearance I also see emptiness, humiliation, defeat.

What happened to him while he was away?

What happens to us when we run away?

Henri Nouwen says, “The further I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world.”

What happened to this son was what needed to happen for him to remember his true home... and once he remembered, he could hear – ever so quietly – the voice calling him Beloved... and he felt the touch of blessing. He now had strength to begin the long journey home.

Isn't this typical of human behaviour?

We need to wait until we're completely done with life as it is before we're able to allow ourselves to turn to God for help?

Human ego is so strong-willed that it often takes a feeling of utter hopelessness and helplessness before we can turn our hearts to a power greater than ourselves for help restoring us to the people we were created to be.

And it's often at that place at the bottom where we are able to hear God's voice offering us life in the midst of death... offering us blessing in the midst of despair.

Its our choice... life or death.

The prodigal son made a decision to chose life and then he headed for home

And can you imagine how long that trip must have been? I mean I don't know the distance but I'm certain the conversations playing around in his head were very uncomfortable.

Take a second to think about a time in your own life when you've really messed up.... when you've had to humble yourselves and admit you were wrong and not only wrong but downright stupid in your decision making?

What was it like for you to have to own that... and ask for forgiveness from those who had to reap the rewards of whatever your mistake was. What were you expecting to happen as you prepared to make your apology?

The story says, "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. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe, the best one, and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

I grew up with an image of God that was very harsh & judgmental. I always had this image of a big guy sitting on a far off cloud... with a long white beard and glaring eyes... holding one of those lightning bolt things... ready to zap me at any moment. I don't think anyone every told me that's what God was like... but it was definitely out there and I definitely took it on.

And that image still shows up from time to time. Doesn't make for easy or authentic repentance. It becomes a repentance of desperation.. of survival..

“I don’t know what else to do or who to turn to so I’m going to just ask for God’s help here and make some ridiculous promise that I know I’m not going to keep”... as if God doesn’t know our motives.

This is not what God wants for us. God wants to restore us to our full dignity as one of God’s children and yet... we seem to want to settle on being the hired help.

Why is that? Is it because restoration brings with it a significant responsibility as the child of God? Is it because we’re not ready to break away from our rebellion against God and surrender to God’s love? Is it that we’re not yet completely convinced that there isn’t something we really need from those voices that call us off to distant lands?

Receiving forgiveness requires a complete willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring and renewing. As the hired help, we get to keep our distance. We can still revolt, reject, run away or complain about our pay. But as the beloved child of God, we have to claim our full dignity.

Now I’d like you to take a moment to look at the image here of the father. What do you notice? Notice his heart.

There is no doubt – in the parable or in the painting – about the father’s heart. His heart goes out to his son...absolutely.

This story of a father’s love affirms for me that it is not us who choose God, but God chooses us. Before any human being decides anything about us, God “knits us together in our mother’s womb.” God loves us with an unlimited, unconditional love. A lavish love. God wants us to be the beloved children.

For most of my life I struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I still do sometimes. But I realize now that during all that time of searching... God’s been right here... loving me.

So the question isn’t “How do we find God?”... its “how do we see and experience God right here... right now... just as we are?” And the question isn’t “How do we get to know God?” but “How do we let ourselves be known by God?”.

And finally the question isn’t “How do we love God?” but “How do we let ourselves to be loved by God?” God is looking into the distance for us, longing for us to come home.

How different would our spiritual journeys be if rather than seeing ourselves as people seeking God’s love, we saw ourselves as people opening hearts to receive the love that God is already offering.

But before any of this, we need to accept that we are worth looking for. This, for me anyway, lies at the core of the spiritual struggle: it’s the struggle against self-rejection, self-contempt

and even self-loathing. It's not an easy struggle because the world conspires against us to make us think of ourselves as unworthy.

The knowledge of our goodness can come only when we allow ourselves to be loved by God.

Our greatest sin is denying God's love for us and ignoring... or not believing in... our goodness. When we do this we lose touch with our true self and set off on a long journey to the distant lands... looking for a home that isn't there.

So how about we let ourselves be found... and loved and celebrated by God.

Listen for that oh-so-quiet and gentle voice... whispering in your ear, "you are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased.