

Ministers of Reconciliation

Preached on The Ninth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
August 14, 2022
Text: Lk 15: 11-32

A few minutes ago we heard one of the most famous parables in all of the New Testament. It is not only one of the most beautiful stories that Jesus ever told; it is also recognized as one of the most beautiful stories in all of human literature. The story is so succinct, yet so full of nuance. As you hear it each year in the Church's liturgy or if you read it at home in your own Bible, there is always something new and fresh about it.

There are three individuals in this story. We can say a few words about each one of them but particularly about the father. We want to concentrate on him because he is the one we are to emulate.

First of all is that prodigal younger son. He had no claim to his share of the inheritance until after his father died. But he evidently made such a fuss that the father capitulated to his demands. He divided his property in shares: two-thirds to the older brother and one-third to the younger, according to the Law as outlined in the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy. The younger son could now go off and seek his fortune and adventure. We know what happened to him. He went off to a far country and blew it all. He grew so hungry and desperate that eventually he was reduced to feeding pigs. Jesus's Jewish listeners would have known that a Jew could not sink any lower than feeding swine. Then he made a hundred and eighty degree turn and he came back to his father.

We have here a story of sin and conversion. Essentially conversion, at its root, means to turn back, to return. The Prodigal was converted. And he was humbled. He came back home in a state of repentance, realizing that he had no claim on his father's good graces whatsoever.

But the father had been hoping each day that this son might return. Perhaps he would occasionally go up on the flat roof of his house and scan the horizon, hoping against hope. Perhaps he would walk up to a hill and look as far as he could see and wonder, "Where is my son? Is he living or dead?" One day he spied his son a long way off, perhaps recognizing his distinctive gait. The son, in tatters, trudged along the road barefoot, dirty, and smelling of those swine. But his father can't wait. Ignoring proper decorum, he runs out and meets him on the road, grabs him and hugs and kisses him. The young man begins his confession to his father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." That's about all he can get out before his father interrupts him. He will hear none of it. He's already forgiven him. He calls to the servants to dress his son with a fine robe, put shoes on him, and a ring on his finger. They are to kill the fatted calf and celebrate. His son wasn't dead after all but alive!

This is a wonderful story. Jesus could have ended it there but he didn't. As the celebration is going on, we turn our attention to the older son. He hears all the noise, music dancing and celebration and asks what it is all about. The overjoyed servants tell him. He's so angry he won't even go into the celebration. His father has to come out and beg him to come in, beg him to be reconciled with his brother. But he won't do it. He will have none of it.

Notice in the story that he doesn't even call his father, "Father," at this point. It's as though he's lost respect for his father for being so weak as to take back this youngest son. And he won't even call his brother, "brother." It's now "your son." The story is left open-ended. Did he go back in? We would hope so. But this could also be the prelude to civil war. This would be a worse sin than what the prodigal had committed. What is worse than brother against brother, more bloody than civil war?

Do we identify with the prodigal son? Do we say, "There was a time that I was so far from God, so miserable and so unhappy that I finally said, "I can't live like this anymore." We turn back to God to ask his forgiveness and we receive it generously, just as the prodigal did. Or are we like the elder son? "I can't understand," we might say, "how God can be so merciful and so generous to such revolting people." We can find it so hard to forgive the sins of others. And yet our Father is as generous in his love to each one of us as he is to those we write off. There is a little bit of the prodigal in us, as there is a little bit of the elder son. But Jesus really wants us to be imitators of that father who received the son back.

Think of the father's options. He could say daily that "I gave away my life savings, my fortune, to this kid and he vanishes. And here he is, back again, and broke." He could react with stony silence. "I'm not going to say a word to him. I'll let him twist slowly in the wind." Or, he could greet his son with The Lecture which will include, "I told you so." Most earthly fathers would find this option irresistible.

But the father in the parable didn't give him a lecture. He received him back, no questions asked. He could have said, "All right, you're back. You can sleep out with the hired hands and we'll put you to work and see how it goes." After all, that's all the son really expected his father to do for him. "Treat me as one of your hired hands." That's what he was thinking and rehearsing as he trudged along the road.

But the father embraced and kissed him. This is not what we would expect. But that's precisely the point that Jesus wants to make. This is the way of our heavenly Father. Remember that Jesus came into the world to reveal the Father to us. He said, "He who sees me, sees the Father also." If you understand me," says Jesus, "you'll understand your Father." Jesus was so quick to forgive, as is the Father. But it's one of the most difficult things we ever do.

St. Paul understood this. In his misguided zeal, he persecuted the Church of Christ before his conversion. Later, Paul understood who he was, and who we Christians ought to be. This is what Paul writes in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

". . .If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. All this has been done by God the Father, who has reconciled us to himself, through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...This makes us ambassadors for Christ. God, as it were, appealing through us" (2 Cor.5:17-20).

We are the "us" Paul writes about. He is writing about the Church. When Jesus came into the world, he came here for one purpose: to reconcile mankind to the Father. That ministry of reconciliation is the work of the Church. When he gathered the Apostles together on the night of His resurrection, the whole Church was in the Upper Room. And he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven." This is the work of all of us. We are ambassadors of reconciliation within our families, our parish, and our community.

This mission is urgently required in our polarized nation. Trust has broken down in so many ways. Formerly trusted authorities are now under suspicion, this being encouraged by *new* authorities whose primary claim to this status is their grievance and paranoia of the older authorities. And who can grant authority to these avatars other than aggrieved and paranoid individuals?

But that is a very lonely business. People still need community. Even believers in the wackiest conspiracy theories are not ruminating on these in isolation; rather, they desire to join with those of like mind through social media or in-person events. Everyone wants the validation of their views within the embrace of their tribe.

But the Church cannot simply link up with a tribe and hunker down. She is supposed to be international, cross-cultural, and multi-ethnic. She must have something to say that nobody else can say. But she must deliver more than a theory untethered to a faithful community. It must be embodied in the Church, even if imperfectly. There is simply no Christianity apart from the Body of Christ. Even given modern cynicism about institutions, people still crave community and human interaction. They desire a place of safety where they are cared for. All around us everything can appear to be crumbling, with no solid ground on which to stand. People want something that is real, something genuine and good, something worthy of praise in which they can participate. What they really want is reconciliation to God, even if they won't acknowledge it. When the Church is being the Church, they should find this there.

We can act like that elder brother or we can act like many typical fathers with the silent treatment or The Lecture. Or we can be as this uncommon father was in the parable, one who forgives completely and totally. These choices are ours to make. Pray God we make the right choice. Today this is what we offer to God our Father in the Eucharist: that through, with, and in Christ our Lord, we may each be ministers of reconciliation.

In the Name...