

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More March 31, 2019
Lent 4th Sunday of Year C Luke 15:1-32 (11-32) Prodigal Son

Most often if something sounds too good to be true, it's not true. Today's Gospel passage, which we are accustomed to call the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," might just be the exception to that rule. Precisely because it seems too good to be true is the reason why we call it "gospel," "good news." The image of God, as depicted in the behavior of the father, is something we could never have imagined on our own. It had to be revealed to us by Jesus. All too often the picture we humans paint of God is of a Being like us, albeit on a much grander scale, but nonetheless embodying some of our darker human characteristics. In this parable we find a face of God in which there is no judgment, no recrimination or condemnation, only unconditional love.

Usually we think of this parable as being about forgiveness. Of course, that is true, but really it is about something more. It is less about forgiveness and more about a welcoming home. In one sense, the son was never far from home. Physically, yes, he was far away when he took the money and ran, but he was always "at home" in his father's heart, in his father's thoughts, worries and cares about his safety. So, when at last the father has his son close to him, what happened in the past doesn't matter any more. All that matters is that he is back home. Nowhere in the story does the father say to the son, "I forgive you." To do that would be to bring up his son's moral failure. Rather the father acts to restore the situation to the way things were. He tells the servants to put a ring on his son's finger. The ring could be used to seal a contract. It gave the son access to his father's wealth. It's like giving your kid a new credit card, after he had maxed out ten others. This is an unusual father. He tells them to put sandals on his feet. It's only the servants who go about barefoot. Another sign that the son is welcomed back into the family. Jesus is telling us that this is what the One whom He calls "Father" is like. It is time to celebrate because the relationship between father and son has been restored. Ultimately this is all that matters---not what the son did, but that now his father has him back.

Yes, there is a note of judgment, of condemnation, of accusation in the story, but it is not on the part of the father. It is on the part of the son about himself. He says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son." The father cuts him off, as soon as the son begins his no doubt well-rehearsed speech. The father doesn't want to, doesn't need to hear all that. This is his son and he will always be his son, no matter what. He just wants to get him dressed for the "welcome home" party. The real tragedy was not that the son had distanced himself physically from his father when he ran away from home, but that he had distanced

himself emotionally. He really did not know who his father was, nor did he realize the depth of his father's love for him.

Jesus tells this parable to defend Himself; He is being attacked by the Pharisees for "welcoming sinners and eating with them," i.e., Jesus, by His behavior, seems to consider sinners to be just as good as anybody else, even as good as the Pharisees think they themselves are. For the Pharisees, religion was about proving oneself to be a good and pious Jew by the performance of any number of good deeds. The ones whom the Pharisees label as sinners have little to show for themselves. Jesus is communicating a definite message to the Pharisees---something they are not interested in hearing; something that was quite shocking and revolutionary then, as it is today. It is that God's love for us does not depend on what we do or don't do, whether we be sinners or saints. God's love is always there---that's the "good news." And God's will is that each of us should be aware of that, that each of us should flourish as His beloved children. The love of God is not something that we earn, but something we receive.

I said a moment ago that traditionally we consider this parable to be about forgiveness. But there is a danger if we focus only on that, because we may imagine that God forgives the way that we forgive. Usually when we forgive, we finally come around to changing our mind or our attitude about someone. We finally let go of our anger, or our judgment about, or our condemnation of an individual, and agree to "let bygones be bygones." We manage to get over something, but God does not have to get over anything. God never changes God's attitude towards us, because in God there never was, never is, any anger or judging or condemning---only the desire that we should flourish. God's love is there before, during and after. The more we become aware of that essential truth, the more we grow as a child of God, the more we come to resemble God's way of loving.

The message of the parable is that it is not God who turns away from us, but we who turn away from God. So, it is we who have to change our mind about ourselves. In the parable the son realizes the depths to which he has sunk; he has hit bottom; so, he "comes to his senses" and begins his journey back to his father. "Forgiveness," or better, "reconciliation" is essentially the awareness of the mess we have gotten ourselves into, in our selfishness or cruelty or indifference, the awareness of what we have lost and the desire to be reconnected with the One who can get us back to that place in our life where we want to be, a place we can call "home."

The parable ends with the father pleading with the elder brother to join the celebration. The brother's speech shows that he is just like the Pharisees because he considers his brother only as some moral reprobate. Jesus leaves the parable open-

ended---we don't know if the elder brother comes in or stays outside. The parable is open-ended because it is addressed to each of us as well. We have to ask ourselves with whom we identify in the story, whom do we resemble. Is it the son in that we need to restore our relationship with God; is it the son in that we have to examine all those kinds of people whom we are accustomed to judge, or is it the father who is welcoming to all? Do I stand outside or join in the celebration? Jesus is saying to each of us, "Join the party. Come into My world, where judgment and condemnation and labeling and gossiping have no place, but only acceptance and the desire that we all should flourish as God's children. Join the party. Come into my world. Won't you?"