

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 31, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, Maryland

Readings: Psalm 32; Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Grace to you and peace from God - Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Amen

“Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons.’” (Luke 15; 11) The story Jesus told had no title. It was one of three stories Jesus told in response to the religious leaders who “were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” He told them three stories that pointed to the outrageous grace God extends to all people. Three stories about God’s unearned, unconditional, persistent love for all people that is surely reason for great joy and celebration. Isn’t it?

Jesus told them of a shepherd who would leave his herd to search for the one lost sheep and invited friends and neighbors to rejoice with him when he returned home with the found sheep. He told them of a woman who cleaned and searched through the night to find a lost coin. When she has found it, the woman calls her friends and neighbors to come rejoice with her. Then he tells the story about “a man who had two sons.” And it was much like the other two stories, with the younger son who is lost to his father and family and when he returns home, the father invites friends and neighbors to celebrate and rejoice with him, “for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” If the story of the man and his two sons followed the pattern of the lost sheep and coin, the story would end at the party but it does not. Jesus turns the story toward the elder son, toward the religious leaders of his time and good “church folks” ever since who are not sure they want to celebrate that God is so forgiving, so generous with “those” other, sinful people deemed unworthy. It seems there is more than one way to get lost and turn away from the love of God.

Most of us identify with the elder son in this story of a man who had two sons. We’ve tried to be good, played by the rules and taken our responsibilities seriously. We’ve worked hard, played fair and fulfilled our church obligations. It gets one’s blood pressure rising. This young ne’er-do-well broke his father’s heart, rejected his family and wasted his inheritance yet was

treated so grandly, forgiven so easily and welcomed with a party. As the elder son's anger turns on the father, we discover that somewhere along the line he had climbed on his high horse and also left his father and the joy of his house even though he stayed on the property. How did he become so bitter and joyless?

It's clear that the elder son didn't understand and hadn't enjoyed the depth and unconditional quality of his father's love any more than the younger son had. He turned working with his father into slavery and celebration into something you do apart from the father, only with friends. And most of all, it appears he believes he has earned the love of his father and deserves his inheritance by his own actions. Though he had lived in the father's presence and bounty, he had become joyless and unfree. Henri Nouwen calls it the underside of virtue --- When our commitment to do what is right acquires a moralistic intensity that leads us to become judgmental and self-righteous. While it may have begun with wanting to love and obey the Lord, it turns into a private version of religion that places oneself above others, apart from the father and unable to celebrate the vastness of God's grace.

Pastor Tim Zingale tells about a time when he was twelve years old and his dad took him and a friend to the carnival. His Dad purchased them all armbands and they entered the gates. The boys were awestruck at all of the blinking lights, the throngs of people, the voices disappearing into the night air, and, most of all, the numerous rides.

He writes, "We heard the shrieks of joy from those who were riding on the various rides in the carnival night. Their faces lit up much like the bright lights and you could see grins so wide that it seemed their faces would split open from their excitement. As I watched them, I could imagine the feeling of lightness in their stomachs as they were rocked to and fro. I could almost feel the breath being suddenly thrust out of their lungs as they lurched from side to side. It looked like so much fun!

We walked on. Everyone that we approached seemed to be enjoying themselves greatly. Each ride that we came to looked more exciting than the previous one. The people aboard seemed to be having the time of their lives. The whole scene looked so inviting. And yet we had no money.

My dad had paid for the armbands and set us loose. Without any money, we were left to watch everyone else enjoying themselves. The more we saw everyone else having a great time, the more miserable we became and wished my father would come and get us out of that place.

Then we heard my dad say to us, “Hey, you two. What are you doing?”

“We’re just watching these people on the rides,” I replied.

“Why aren’t you riding any of them,” my father asked.

“We don’t have any money to buy tickets,” I continued.

“Son, the rides are included in the price that I already paid. Your armband get you access to all the rides.”

We were stunned. We could have been enjoying the carnival to its fullest extent by just taking advantage of what my father had given us.¹ It’s the story of the elder son. It’s the story of those who turn following Christ into a joyless chore and those who push aside grace to demand what they think they are due. It’s a parable about all the peace and life God wants to freely give us if we will but let God love and bless us.

There was a man who had two sons. The father loved both his sons. He loved them both totally and uniquely and wanted to share his life and all he had with each of them. He went out to meet both sons even when it was they who were disobedience and rejecting. He does not compare his sons or rank them. Loving one doesn’t mean he loves the other less. Being generous with one, doesn’t mean he’s taking it away from the other. A fatted calf had always been available for the elder and the younger son. And we are left to wonder at the end of the story whether the elder son will choose to return to the father who loves two sons or walks away from a father because he loves too generously. What would the grumbling religious leaders decide . . . and what will the elder sons and daughters in us decide?

Dr. Fred Craddock grew up on a farm and recalls playing the old, no-cost game of Hide and Seek. You know how it goes. Somebody’s “it.” The person who’s “it” hides his or her eyes, counts to 100 and then yells, ‘Coming – ready or not!’ Dr. Craddock shares that when he played the game with his sister she always cheated. She would start counting “1, 2, 3, 4, 98, 99, ready or not here I come.” He said, “I always knew

what she was doing. Being smaller and younger than her, I always hid under the steps of the porch. She couldn't see me there. She would always pass by me to look in another location. Then it occurred to me. She might never find me here. So after awhile I would stick out a portion of my body so she would see me. She would yell out, "I see you, I see you," and run back to the base and declare I was now "it." I would say, 'Dogonit, you found me.' But Craddock wonders - what did I really want, did I want to hide or did I really want to be found?"²

In the story of a man who had two sons we see there are lots of ways to run away from God and get lost. Lent invites us to stop hiding and let ourselves be found by the One Lord who never stops seeking us, who is always running out to meet us to bring us home and celebrate. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 3/13/10

Endnotes

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1. Tim Zingale, "Good News to the Poor" www.sermoncentral.com
 2. Craddock story retold by Eric S. Ritz in his sermon "Still Waters," The Ritz Collection, Dynamic Preaching 2005.