

Shared Ministries of Ashland & Plymouth

IV Lent 6 March 2016

"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:17-18)

The themes of forgiveness and reconciliation are central to today's readings, but more than that, they are central to our understanding as Episcopalians of what our mission as the Church, as God's people, is all about. Near the back of the Prayer book, on page 855, the mission of the Church and the ministry of the people of the Church are defined in this way: "*The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.*" And then the catechism goes on to note that the particular ministry of the laity is to "*carry on Christ's work of reconciliation.*"

So today's lengthy gospel parable is intended for us, as it describes the sometimes long and painful work of finding forgiveness for ourselves and achieving reconciliation with others. Today's parable, it should be noted, does not stand alone. It's actually the third in a series of parables in the 13th chapter of Luke's gospel, immediately following the two shorter stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. And all three point to the joy that we can experience when reconciliation is achieved. According to Luke, these three parables were directed to the good church folk of the day, those who objected to Jesus' ready acceptance of known sinners. And the repeated line in all three speaks of the rejoicing by God, when the lost is finally found, when the divided and separated are now reconciled. But it is only in this last story, that the actual pain and the real difficulty of true reconciliation are clearly highlighted.

Most of us, as longtime churchgoers, are so familiar with Jesus' parables that we can easily fall into the trap of concluding that we are the ones to be counted among the faithful and that these stories are really directed at someone else. All too often, Jesus' stories may seem simply as folksy anecdotes that reaffirm our notion that good people will be rewarded and evil doers will be justly punished. But, in fact, the opposite is more often the case, and many of Jesus' little stories are intended to challenge our understanding of what God's way is all about. Today's is no exception.

God, according to Jesus, it turns out is not the least bit interested in our wonderful lists of accomplishments. The God of Jesus' parables, it seems to me, cares very little about my resume. Instead of a God who is concerned about how much I might pledge to the church or what I choose to give up for lent, Jesus' stories show us a God who is amazingly accepting of the publican, the "out-and-out crook who simply waltzed into the temple, stared at his shoelaces, and did nothing more than admit as much" (Robert Capon). And in that parable, Jesus concludes by saying that God is closer to the crook than to the hardworking, faithful Pharisee, who could easily be a member of a church Vestry.

In parable after parable, the same is true: bad people are rewarded (like the unjust steward of this wasteful prodigal) while good people are scolded. And in general, everybody's idea of who ought to be first and who ought to be last is liberally doused with cold water.

But let's remember, this parable is not about you, and it's not about me; it is about God. Let me repeat that. This parable is not about you or me; it's about God...but we're in it several times.

The first half of the parable of the Prodigal Son is not unlike the two stories preceding it; describing how the son became lost and then found himself. Jesus says "*he came to himself.*" That's what repentance is all about, coming to one's senses and going in a different direction. And that is

what the immature, selfish, and wasteful son finally does. Having experienced one of what Gandhi listed as the seven deadly sins, ‘wealth without work,’ this adolescent male maxed out his high-limit debit card and was forced to survive as a swine herder on a Gentile hog farm. Someone has commented that this would be like “a fundamentalist preacher’s son ending up in Lynchburg, Tennessee, churning the sour mash vat at the Jack Daniel’s distillery.”

The younger son comes to his senses, realizes the error of his ways, and begins the long journey home, all the while rehearsing his apology. When he reaches the edge of the family farm, what does he see but his father, standing on the porch, scanning the horizon with binoculars, “boy-watching,” hoping beyond hope that his son would one day return.

You know what happens next. The son is barely able to spit out his confession, and yet it hardly matters, because the father doesn’t hear it anyway. “Let’s eat, let’s celebrate,” he says, “the lost is found, my son was as good as dead, but here he is, alive.”

The real, hard work of this parable begins next with the entrance of the elder son, the one whom we might call ‘the faithful, stay-at-home son.’ The presence of the elder brother, the one who spent his life doing the right thing, is a reminder that the good-for-nothing son truly deserved punishment for the financial and emotional damage done to the family.

Now if this had been a real-life situation, and if the older son had been the first to see and greet the prodigal, I would imagine that the story would have had a different ending.

But at the end, Jesus’ story, which had been a life and death situation for the younger brother, now becomes a life and death situation for the faithful, older brother. And just as the prodigal had to *“come to himself”* and give up his image of the independent, self-reliant, self-made man, now it is the older brother, if he is to return to the family, who is faced with the shedding of his pride at being the dutiful one, and giving up the desire for justice and punishment.

Almost a decade ago, when I was serving on a National Church committee, I had the opportunity to get to spend time with a bishop from northern Japan, Nathaniel Uematsu, who was the Primate of the Nippon Sei Ko Kai, the Anglican Church of Japan.

As we shared stories of our past, he told me about his coming to the United States after college to study audiology in Oklahoma, leaving his fiancée in Japan, who would wait four years for him to complete his studies. All this happened long before Nathaniel decided to study for the priesthood. As a layman, he had joined an Oklahoma Episcopal church, where he was warmly welcomed by most of the parishioners. However, the Senior Warden of that parish, a man named Bob, could not seem to warm up to him. For almost three years, they had a very tense relationship, because Bob, the Warden, had been a pilot in the United States Air Force and was shot down over Japan in WWI. There, Bob had to endure a most difficult year and a half, nearly starving, and being tortured in a Japanese concentration camp.

Nevertheless, when Nathaniel’s studies were coming to an end and he brought his fiancée to the US to get married, Bob came to him and asked if her parents were coming for the wedding. When Nathaniel said “No,” Bob asked if he could walk her down the aisle. A bit confused, Nathaniel politely said “Yes,” but he still didn’t understand.

At the wedding, Bob, the former Air Force pilot, cried and afterwards told Nathaniel, “Thank you. Thank you. I am finally free.” For after seeing Nathaniel every Sunday in church and being confronted by the constant reminder of the evil that had been done to him so many years before, an experience that no one had ever apologized for, Bob was finally able to set the past aside and move on with his life. As he said, “I am finally free.”

One often hears it said that we need to “forgive and forget.” And when asked, “Why?” some might say “because the Bible says so.” Well, the Bible nowhere says “forgive and forget.” Instead it calls for remembrance and reconciliation, the kind of forgiveness that is not without considerable effort or pain. Our giving forgiveness, our forgiving the other (not forgetting but forgiving), is often more about the restoration of ourselves than the other.

Most of us, if we are honest (and Lent is a good time for honesty about oneself)--most of us can recognize ourselves in both the role of the unforgivable younger brother and the unforgiving elder sibling, rather than the merciful parent. And in either role, we are called upon to make difficult choices. Forgiving is a very tricky task, because forgiveness does not mean that the other person who offended us, or hurt us, or who strongly disagreed with us, is now right. That's not it at all. As someone has said, “forgiveness doesn't let the other person off the hook. It eliminates the hook altogether,” accepting the painful experience without the judgment that we often attach to it -- and the other. Forgiveness, you seem is not really something we do for the other. It is something we do for ourselves--something that allows us to move on, to come back inside, to welcome the prodigal and ourselves back into the fellowship of man.

This story that Jesus told is about God, and all of us need to come to understand that God is like that aching father, standing out on the porch scanning the horizon for his lost child, spending sleepless night after sleepless night at the computer, searching the internet for any database of missing person, always ready to set aside our sinful ways for the joy of welcoming us home again.

Henri Nouwen, an author whom I highly recommend, once wrote a little book titled “The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming.” In it, Nouwen describes his own lifetime of trying to find God, trying to know God and trying to love God by not falling into sin. But he concludes by saying “Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. And the question is not, ‘How am I to find God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be found by him?’...not ‘How am I to love God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be loved by God?’”

In the Church of England, the Fourth Sunday of lent was traditionally celebrated as Mothering Sunday, recalled centuries past when, on this Sunday in Lent, young men working in guilds were allowed to return home to visit their mothers. This became a Sunday for rejoicing and celebration even though it happened in the midst of Lent.

In each of the three parables of the lost, we hear the invitation “Rejoice with me.” “*Rejoice with me,*” the shepherd says, “*I have found my sheep that was lost.*” “*Rejoice with me,*” the woman says, “*I have found the coin that I lost.*” And “*Rejoice with me,*” the father says, “*this son of mine was lost and is found.*” All these voices are the voice of God, for celebration and rejoicing central parts of God’s kingdom and God’s Church. For “*all this is from God, who reconciled us to himself...and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.*”

Amen.