



Let Go and Come In

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Fourth Sunday in Lent ~ March 31, 2019*

Joshua 5:9-12

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Psalm 32

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| 1 | Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven *
and whose sin is put away! | | them. |
| 2 | Happy are they to whom God imputes no guilt *
and in whose spirit there is no guile! | 8 | You are my hiding-place; you preserve me from trouble;
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| 3 | While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, *
because of my groaning all day long. | 9 | "I will instruct you and teach you
in the way that you should go; *
I will guide you with my eye. |
| 4 | For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; *
my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer. | 10 | Do not be like horse or mule,
which have no understanding, *
who must be fitted with bit and bridle,
or else they will not stay near you." |
| 5 | Then I acknowledged my sin to you *
and did not conceal my guilt. | 11 | Great are the tribulations of the wicked, *
but mercy embraces those who trust in the Most High. |
| 6 | I said, "I will confess my transgressions to God." *
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin. | 12 | Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in God; *
shout for joy, all who are true of heart. |
| 7 | Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers
to you in time of trouble; *
when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach | | |

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So 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; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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: "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, 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.’”

The so called parable of the prodigal son is one of the best known and loved of all Jesus' parables. So well known that we might think we have it all figured out and it has just faded into the background as another "feel good" Jesus story. Today there is not a whole lot that is shocking about a younger son leaving home and heading off to make his own way in the world. The younger son is simply living the American dream—being his own man, independent. True, the way he left home hurt his father, but his father gets it. As the story goes, though, the son fails at independence 101, and returns home, tail between his legs—sad, but wiser because of his experience. Straight into the arms of a forgiving father. If you look at the parable that way, it is about a prodigal son with a repentant heart and about the father's response of generous love. It is a parable about our individual relationship with God. Assurance that when we make the trek home, God will be waiting for us with a great banquet—just for you or for me. What a great story. A very American story. Very American Protestant story. Great if you like stories in which Jesus and his world looks a lot like 21st century America and Americans. But if you put Jesus and the story itself in a 1st century Palestinian setting it looks pretty different, a little less cleanly comforting. It looks pretty un-individualistic and downright un-American, and it just might still have the power to shake us up a bit.

Jesus tells the parable to a bunch of Jewish rural farmers for whom land was livelihood. Land that had been handed down through countless generations—held in trust by each generation for its children. There was no office where deeds, maps and boundaries were recorded—instead these were held in the memory of the community. And if you broke faith with the community by, say, insulting the patriarch, insulting the village and wandering off on your own, well, deeds, maps and boundaries can be forgotten amazingly quickly.

In this world, fierce independence and pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality was not at all prized—wasn't even a concept. Community was prized above all. The well being of any family depended a lot on its neighbors—to help dig wells, plant crops, dig graves. You always went to each other's feasts, married your neighbor's child. Individuals had little or no meaning outside the family—identity was plural, not singular.

The other major difference was the power of honor—the whole social system was honor based. Patriarchs were held in great respect, and a lot of effort, rules and customs went into keeping their honor intact. For example, fathers did not ever leave their place at the head of the table as long as guests were present. They did not plead, barter with or cajole their children. Ever.

Through this social cultural lens, Jesus' parable is more the Parable of the Dysfunctional Family than anything else. A weak father. An absent mother and wife, and two out of control sons. Yet this father is willing to sacrifice his own honor in order to keep his family and community together. It is a story about reconciliation and reunion, not repentance. About what it costs to bring about reconciliation. A story in which individual worth, identity and rightness are sacrificed for the good of the community and for peace and harmony. Taking a look at America right now, perhaps that is the parable we desperately need to hear.

Looked at through the proper cultural lens, when the younger son asks his Dad for his share of the family property he is doing 2 things: breaking up the family estate, livelihood and honor; and he is, in essence, telling his Dad he wishes him dead. He is not thinking about family, honor, or community, He is thinking about himself—his wants and aspirations. Tending and nurturing relationship is nowhere on his radar. Going off to find himself and being his own man are his priorities.

And when the news spreads through the village that the son took his money and ran, the father is a laughingstock whose son has, for all intents and purposes, died. After a while, I would guess, the villagers rally around the Dad, who is still, after all, part of the community. The son? dead to them. No way he will ever be welcomed back—unless he returns with a giant pile of money and throws the biggest banquet ever for the whole village. Then, maybe.

But that's not how things go. The younger son loses everything to the Gentiles and ends up tending pigs, for God's sake. This is a move worthy of what the Talmud calls a qetsatsah—a ceremony to punish a Jewish boy who loses his inheritance to Gentiles. If he ever showed his face in the village again, the community could fill a large earthenware jar with burned nuts and corn, break it in front of the prodigal, and shout his name out loud thus pronouncing him cut off from his people. After which he may as well make a u-turn and go right back to his little buddies, the pigs.

Meanwhile, off in Gentile country, the younger son comes to himself and heads home. Hoping to get to his Dad before the villagers with their earthenware jug can get to him and cut him off. As he hurries home he composes a confession—trying to strike the right balance between groveling and reasserting himself. He doesn't go home because he desperately wants to be in right relationship with his father, he is coming back out of hunger—

looking for lunch—pure and simple.

Someone must have spotted him as he came along the road home and sent word to his father because the next thing you know the old man is racing down the road—clothes flapping around him. Honor and dignity gone. Desperate to get to his son before the villagers with their jug. And he does; before the crowd can get there, the father throws his arms around him, hugging and kissing him. Demonstrating inclusion and saving his relationship with his son and his family's relationship with the village in one move. Sure, this reconciliation will cost him his honor and pride, but he is more than willing to pay that price.

So he tells his slaves to put his own robe, the best robe, on his son, to kill a huge calf and throw a feast for everyone. A great banquet of reconciliation. Feast trumping qetsatsah. Son saved by being restored to a web of relationships, by a father who is willing to be a pretty sorry excuse for a patriarch: a father for whom restoration of relationship is more important than being right, being admired, or even being a good father. Saving his son cost him almost as much as his son's abandonment in the first place, yet he never once complains about the price.

So you would think the father has earned a happy ending. But you heard the parable. The other son shows up, sizes up the situation and refuses to even go into the house. Nobody asked him if he wanted to be reconciled with his loser brother. No one asked him about what was left of his inheritance being spent on a feast or how he felt about wearing the second best robe. He is the good son and he sure isn't about to sit down at the table with a self-centered, pig-tending, shame-bringing brother.

So he refuses to come in. Which means the father, once again, is not seated at the table with his guests, in the place of honor, but is standing outside pleading with another recalcitrant son. Once again, he sets aside his honor to try to effect reconciliation. He never points out how self centered both of his children are: one interested only in self-fulfillment and the other only in being right. Both more interested in themselves than being in right relationship with their father and each other. He could tell them, if they asked, that you can't be in relationship with others without some compromising. That sometimes you have to make concessions, sacrifice a few fields, as well as your honor, self-respect and rightness. It is all about priorities, he could have said. For him, reunion trumps everything. It brings the lost home and the dead back to life.

So he tells this to his older, pig-headed son, but who knows if he heard it? It may have just felt too good, standing stubbornly outside, certain of his own rightness. Even if the price was bringing shame to his father, breaking his heart a little and breaking relationship with the village. So there they stand. One silently fuming. The other wordlessly pleading.

Inside, of course, there is a banquet underway—glasses clinking, people talking, music playing. Most of the village is there. A wonderful party—open to all. Everyone wondering what is going on in the doorway—what choice you will make. Your father won't force you to go in. He'll stand there with you to protect you, just like he protected your brother. His honor in your hands. You can head on into the party as you are—you just can't insist on staying that way. The banquet, you see, is for those who are willing to give up always being right, for those willing to change, for the reconcilable. For anyone who will let go and come in.