

Lent 4, Year C

March 31, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew

The story of The Prodigal Son is familiar to many of us. The character about whom the story is named is young and restless. He was ready to head out on his own and have adventures. He was tired of doing his part for the family business, only to see an endless future of working for his father and eventually his older brother. The cultural norm was that the older brother, in addition to having pride of place all his life, would receive a double share of the inheritance upon their father's death. So the younger son was looking at one third of the property, the part that he would be given when his father died, and imagining what he could do with it if he had it sooner rather than later. He decided to be bold and ask for his part of the inheritance now so that he could make a fresh start in a far away land.

There is a mythical appeal to the story of a young man on a quest. Except that in this tale the foundation for the young man's adventure was not based on the notion of **'destiny,'** as when Nelson Mandela declared **"I am the master of my fate and the captain of my destiny."** The young man in this story was trying to create a life for himself at someone else's

expense. In asking for his share of the inheritance before his father's death, the young man brazenly dishonored his father, essentially wishing him dead. His disrespect would have been apparent not only to his father, but also to the extended family and the community, which may explain his speedy departure. His payday came at a steep cost to his father and his family. His behavior stands in stark contrast to that of Prince Charles, next in line to become the King of England, who when asked about the appeal of this prospect by reporters said, **"Gentlemen, you are speaking about the death of my mother."**

Once the young man was out of town he traveled to a foreign country where he **"squandered his property in dissolute living."** He could be the poster child for the marketing slogan **"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas."** In addition to this harsh lesson, a famine complicated his situation. Having no resources, the young man found a job feeding the pigs of another man. This would have been shameful for a Jewish man, for pigs are unclean according to the Law of God. So low was he that the young man began to look with longing at the food he gave the pigs.

It was at this point that Jesus' story pivots on the powerful phrase **"he came to himself."** The young man had plenty of time to contemplate

himself, his behavior, and his situation. He came to see himself differently. He was no longer an arrogant young man set on adventure without regard to the cost. He saw himself as he was. This kind of honest self-assessment is called humility. The unknown author of the spiritual classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* defines humility as “... a true knowledge and feeling of oneself as one is.” The young man then repented, literally turning back in the direction of his father. Yes, he could go home again. He did not expect to return to the same relationship with his father, whom he had rejected. He planned to confess his sins and ask to be restored to a lesser form of relationship.

The focus of the story then shifts to the father. Few self-respecting Middle Eastern patriarchs would have given a son the requested inheritance in the first place. Having generously done so, a merciful father might allow his errant son to grovel and provide him an opportunity to prove that he had learned his lesson. This father does no such thing. Jesus again set the tone with a simple phrase: “...**his father saw him and was filled with compassion.**” The father cast aside his own dignity and ran to meet his son. He hugged and kissed him. This would have set expectations for how everyone else should treat him. The son began his practiced

apology, but the father interrupted. The father's joy and acceptance were not dependent upon his son's apology. The father's treatment of his son was based in his own compassion, not his son's contrition. The son neither earned nor deserved mercy, yet he received it anyway.

The focus of the story changes yet again, this time to the older brother. He only found out about his brother's return when he came home from working in the fields and heard the sounds of the party. No one had bothered to get him. The story says, **"Then he became angry and refused to go in."** His response is understandable. The younger brother chose to behave badly, shaming the entire family. The father not only let him go and gave him his inheritance, but now has welcomed him back with an enormous party. He knows nothing of his brother's change of heart. He only sees the apparent lack of consequences and even rejoicing for his brother, plus the fact that no one included him. When the father came to talk with him, the older son spoke with bitterness, for he had been diligent and responsible and was now resentful. When had he been appreciated and celebrated? It didn't seem fair. The father assured him that he loves both his sons, which appears implicit rather than explicit until now. The father chose compassion and mercy. He invited the older son to do the

same. We do not know what happened next. The story is left open for us to ponder. Poet Rudyard Kipling mused

**All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And every one else is They**

Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son to the Pharisees and the Scribes who, like the older brother, were responsible and worked hard at following the Law of God. They tried to be in right relationship with God and other people. Yet they saw Jesus welcoming overt sinners like the younger brother. This parable could be understood as not only explaining the choice of God to be like the father in the story and embrace those who have strayed, but also as reassurance to those who have tried to be faithful that they are loved, and that they do not need to earn God's love any more than the younger brother did. It is far easier to love when we know that we ourselves are loved, and to forgive when we know we ourselves are accepted. Relationship with God is not a competition. There is no need for sibling rivalry. Both brothers were lost, though in different ways, and both can be found. The challenge for many of us comes in believing that there is enough love to share. We are all invited to let go of our burdens and

resentments, our fear and our shame, our need to prove ourselves in one way or another, and join the celebration.

Amen