

We come today to one of the best known parables of Jesus - the parable of the Prodigal Son. It's a parable unique to Luke; it appears in no other gospel. But with Luke's singular style, beautiful writing and elegant description, it's not only one of the best known parables, it's perhaps one of the most loved.

I wonder about this. What makes this parable so captivating, so popular, so cherished? Beyond being unique to Luke, it seems to stand apart from most other parables as a story unto itself - complete with a narrative arc, plot twists, painful dissonance, drama, and a surprise ending. But I think it captivates us not because of its literary sophistication, but because of how familiar a story it is. At least it's beginning.

In those days, not unlike today, a child asking for their "cut" of the inheritance from their parent would have been shocking to Luke's audience - being tantamount to saying "I don't want to stick around and wait for your death to get what's mine." Horrible right? But we can hear what sits behind such a statement: Quite simply, it's a broken relationship. And who among us doesn't have their own story or experience of broken relationships? We immediately see ourselves in the story. So right off the bat, people not unlike us, just as we did, would have leaned in and "come near to listen".

But at this point in time, in one of our last stops on this Lenten path we've been walking, it's important to ask why - Why does it come to us now? What are we given to hear now, today?

On this Lenten path so far we've sought to take account of our personal failings, our social harms, and the ways we've broken relationship (i.e. our sin). This honesty and admission is part of the discipline of Lent. So in a way, this parable today, at this point, **holds us up to ourselves** for a better look. But not only that - it also shows us God's intention for us, in Lent and beyond. That intention, God's intention for us, as we see in this parable, is reconciliation.

I looked it up and reconciliation is defined as the "restoration of friendly relations (Google)". Sure, that's accurate. But I think there's a deeper reality here that describes God's intention of reconciliation better. We'll get to that but first let's linger our way through the story.

Tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him, So he told them this parable. Tax collectors and sinners. These are folks who know broken relationship. "Sinners" might be a little vague, but tax collectors were quite specific: They were Jews who collected taxes from fellow Jews on behalf of Rome (the imperial power that occupied Palestine in the time before, during and after Jesus). So tax collectors were seen as having sided with Rome at the literal "expense" of their own community. This made them utterly despised. Their relationship with their own people was broken and they were likely reminded of that brokenness daily as they went about their collections.

Where do you see yourself in the story? Are you among the tax collectors? Those who, for whatever reason, "sold out" the community from which you came, the one that raised you? Perhaps not. But the vague descriptor of "Sinners" casts a wider net. If we're seeking to find ourselves in the story, it's a simpler thing to count ourselves among the sinners coming near to listen, aware as we often are of the ways we fall short in large and small ways. I think the label is purposely vague in order to allow all people who feel the brokenness of relationships, whether with people or with God, to see themselves as among these "sinners" drawing near to listen.

Listening to him as the sinners we are, we side naturally with this wayward son who squanders his inheritance and returns home “unworthy” to consider himself his father’s son. But to these people (and to you) Jesus offers consolation. When the son is still far off the father sees him; “he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him”. Ignoring his son’s measured words, the father welcomes him with unabashed rejoicing! Forgiveness isn’t even a consideration: The father goes immediately to joy - “for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

Before talking about the others listening to Jesus from afar, I have a question. Do any of you feel like this wayward son got off a little easily? I certainly did initially. Remember the son is coming home to beg his father for mercy he is not owed - he’s already received what was his, and now it’s gone. He must have been feeling huge guilt, humiliation, like he deserved nothing from his father - he must have felt shame. Then his father comes rushing up rejoicing. Did those feelings just evaporate? I imagine they infused his experience of the celebration - “I shouldn’t be getting this. I’m screwed up: I’m not worthy of this.”

These feelings don’t get mentioned. But as the father’s joy shocks the crowd and takes center stage, I wonder if any in that crowd were encountering similar feelings. I wonder if any of you are encountering such feelings: Unworthy at this joyful affection, guilt, deserving of punishment, shame. These feelings would have been roadblocks to the crowd really hearing Jesus’ message. If you feel them, their roadblocks to you too. Shame keeps us from connecting to the love Jesus is describing. Were the Pharisees feeling shame? Remember shame often hides behind anger.

Regardless, hearing their angry grumbling, Jesus continues his parable.

Obviously ticked off that the irresponsible younger brother is celebrated upon returning, the older brother is filled with resentment: He is the good son! He's done everything right - he's been dutiful, and hard working. He's never lost his way, he's "stayed found" his whole life! The father, hear's his eldest son out, and wants joy for him too at the return of his little brother. So he begs him to join the party. In reaction to his older son's resentment, the father says, "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.

It's a subtle thing, and maybe not entirely important. But the father, in a very small way, is sounding the reconciliation Jesus is describing. The father, running out to meet his son on the road says, "for this son of mine". And speaking to his eldest son, he says, "this brother of yours." These short phrases do what they say - reweaving the relationships that have been broken, deftly, gently resowing the tear, closing the breach.

More to the point though, in the words that follow I hear the invitation directed at each listener named in our reading ("Come to life"). And these are the words for you too, Messiah, wherever it is you find yourself in the story. In the words of Paul, "Be reconciled to God." Tax collector, sinner, or Pharisee, all wayward from the reconciliation God intends, each must have had a difficult time believing and receiving the father's joy. But Jesus neither qualifies it, nor explains it any further. We're left to wrestle with it. But we're also left with this invitation - "Believe it or not, this is the father's joy", we hear Jesus say. "This is my joy in your returning."

But how does God overcome that persistent gap - the shame that keeps us from truly hearing, from truly believing?

I read some words this week by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. He talks about this parable in the context of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage, he says, is never just a journey between places - rather it's always a journey to the "reality of 'where I am.'" He points out that the Prodigal son's father comes the greatest distance to welcome his son. That is the distance created by the son's failures, his need and his feeling unworthy of relief. But Rowan goes on, saying that God not only travels that great distance, "God's loving kindness is there ahead of us..." - God is already there, at the heart. He writes, ***"Forgiveness is never a matter of persuading God of something | but of discovering for myself that there is no distance to be crossed."***

This is the reconciliation God desires for each of us. It's a reconciliation between Godself and your self - the closing of the gap, the repair of the breach. This is the new creation Paul speaks of, a new creation dependent on God's action of reconciling the world to God's self. *"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"* This is the destination of Lent, this slow walk to the brim of Holy Week and the lingering steps of the Three Days. The shame that stands in the way of taking in and breathing the truth of our forgiveness is overcome by the love and divine joy God bears for us. Shame is no match for God's desired closeness. Discovering that God needs no persuading at all, even in spite of our worst failings, is the journey of Lent - the journey of discovery that there is no distance to be crossed.

Now, that would be a good place to leave it. But I feel like there's one more thing to be said. For reconciliation with God is one thing. But there is far more in the world, in Red Lodge, even in this very community, where reconciliation is needed.

So it is, from this place of discovery, this place of relenting acceptance, this place on the road where God overcomes the shame that keeps us from seeing, that this reconciliation with God spills over to the rest of the world. Grounded in this nearness, God's closeness, the unitive intention of God's reconciling all the world, we become ambassadors for God's reconciliation in the world. Division, wherever it may be found - between us and God, between us and each other, in Washington, in Red Lodge, in Ukraine, at Messiah - we are sent, believing in God's reconciling power, to bring God's reconciling power.

And so it is that these brothers rejoice together with their father. So it is that the crowd comes closer still, hearing completely. So it is that whatever shame it is | keeping us from feeling, receiving, and accepting God's embrace will be overcome by the joy of God's new creation.

AMEN

So the son's pilgrimage, started and completed by God, is the son's journey to the recognition that forgiveness is his already. The father's joy, skipping over forgiveness, is a sign of its need fulfilled...

Rowan Williams:

It is not that I have a long journey to undertake in order to get to God, but that I have a long journey to my own reality. It is my heart, the centre or source of my own being, that is furthest away from my surface mind and feelings, and **pilgrimage is always a travelling to where I am**. . . . God is not merely, like the Prodigal's Son's father, on the way to us: he is there at the heart. Or: he travels to meet himself in what is always other, eager to recognize his own joy and beauty in the distinctness of what is not God's self. However we put it—there are countless ways—God's loving kindness is there ahead of us. **Forgiveness is never a matter of persuading God of something but of discovering for myself that there is no distance to be crossed, except that longest journey to that which gives truth and reality to my very self.**

in search of new or expanded meaning about their self,

But Pharisees were listening to Jesus as well. While sinners were coming near, the Pharisees were grumbling away. Before we are too hard on these Pharisees though, pause with me. These religious authorities are watching as these disreputables are coming near to Jesus. This might have been seen by them as a violation of important purity codes, just as this son would have been impure from having worked with pigs. Think about it: they are watching Jesus acting out the action of the story. I feel kind of bad for them, suddenly on the margins - at least in this crowd. But Jesus doesn't leave them out entirely.

Joshua 5:9-12

The disgrace of Egypt is past - physical sign

Passover kept. Day after, they ate produce of the land (Manna no longer)

Manna replaced. One provision for another.

Psalms 32

Kept silence? I wasted away, hand was heavy upon me
Acknowledged sin? You forgave “the guilt of my sin.”
You surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

In Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.

Ministry of reconciliation

19 In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. Be reconciled to God... We might become the righteousness of God

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Tax collectors and sinners “coming near” | Pharisees grumbling away
99 Sheep / Pearl of great value: Found - REJOICE!

More joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous
Joy in the presence of the angels of God over 1 sinner repents

Younger brother repents - goes a different way: Forgiveness

We live in a state of forgiveness - hard to believe

We want something different... little brother...

Pilgrimage - traveling to where I am

God is there at the heart - where we are - not only coming to us

“discovering there is no distance to be crossed”

Older brother and Pharisees

Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, takes a broad view of the story of Jesus for the sake of this community in Corinth suffering in its own broken relationships. He's saying that Christ was about reconciliation, God's grand purpose of reconciliation: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation."

To reconcile, realign relationship - this sits centrally in Psalm 32 with this simple description of confession and forgiveness.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away...
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me...
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

This echoes the action of the son who sets his mind to return home in his desperation and beg mercy from his father. I imagine hearing this, the folks gathered to hear Jesus would have eagerly expected the son's rejection by the father. Nothing entertains quite like conflict, after all. But what happens? The son hadn't even arrived home when the father "was filled with compassion" and ran to him "and put his arms around him and kissed him!"