

THE FOURTH
SUNDAY IN
LENT

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Luke 15:11-32 4 Lent 2013 II
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Coming Home

A familiar scene: The Pharisees are grumbling, yet again about Jesus' socializing with the wrong kind of people. But instead of immediately condemning the Pharisees for their self-righteousness, Jesus simply tells a story. Jesus tells a story that is probably very familiar to us all whether we're familiar with the Bible or not.

*Jesus tells a poignant and heart wrenching tale about a family in crisis. He tells a tale about a selfish, lost child and a loving parent whose remaining son harbors an anger and resentment that this heartbroken father can't even imagine.

I know I knew this story long before I read it in scripture because it was a story that I lived. My oldest sister was the prodigal child, my mother and father were the heartbroken parents, and for a time I was the dutiful, ultimately resentful child that stayed home and tried to do everything right.

I have a feeling we can all find ourselves in this story. We can all resonate with the memory of angry words, slammed doors, and actions that are hard to take back. For some of us these are memories of the past and for many others they may be a present aching pain.

There was a man who had two sons...

Most of us remember this as a story about one thoughtless child who broke his Father's heart, left home, wasted a fortune on bad living and then returned a broken man. But there are two lost sons in this tale as well as a father whose love is so great it knows neither dignity nor restraint; it is a lavish, reckless love this parent has for his children.

Our common choice of focusing only on the actions of the one son's thoughtlessness as opposed to the Father's great love tells us a lot about both ourselves and God. We often train our eyes to see what is wrong and broken instead of focusing on God's greatest yearning and passionate dream for all of God's children and even the whole creation to be whole and loved.

This parable is a scandal to many; we cannot bear to see the wastrel son restored to the father's graces so easily and completely. The elder son resonates with his indignant insistence that he is more deserving of such celebration. We tend to want to hang on to our hurt until the one who has hurt us is brought low. It is understandable, but God seems to see it differently.

I believe that part of the tragedy of the human condition is that it is far easier to be selfish or resentful than it is to be forgiving. Selfishness and resentment seem to feed on themselves and both are pretty easy to fuel. All we have to do is rehearse them over and over; they are easy to cling to, we can hold them tight with an angry white-knuckled fist.

Sometimes we get so used to feeding our selfishness or resentment that we find we are bereft without them; they just become part of who we are. God knows that selfishness and resentment are seductive sins.

These two, perhaps far more than any other sins have great power to blind us to the deep and merciful wideness of God's abiding love for all.

But forgiveness...forgiveness is so much harder to find or to hold. Forgiveness makes us feel weak and vulnerable---how can we survive in a tough world if we show that kind of weakness? Surely Jesus does not mean that we have to forgive no matter what---there must be exceptions to the rule?

Yet over and over Jesus teaches us that truly living at the heart of God means forgiving; we can't escape it; Jesus teaches us forgiveness over and over again and again:

He tells us about the official who was forgiven an incredible debt, the woman about to be stoned who is set free from her shame, he tells us about a selfish, thoughtless son restored to his father's full embrace---and most startling of all--- he teaches us even with his last breath---uttering a plea to God to forgive those who were so challenged by him teaching such forgiving love that to silence him they put him to death.

But forgiveness *is so difficult*. Forgiveness is counterintuitive. To forgive is to give the possibility of new life to a situation or a person that is quite possibly undeserving. The *forgiver* is the one who has been hurt and now has to give in order to feel whole again. That's not fair. Shouldn't the one who did the harm be the one who has to do the work?

Surely there must be consequences for bad acts and bad actors? Surely there must be consequences for sin? Well, Jesus never tells us that there are no consequences, but he is also very clear that losing God's love *simply is not one of them*.

This is God's ongoing gift to the human family. God's mercy and love always has the last word. But forgiveness *is* complicated and learning to accept and share God's expansive brand of forgiveness is a journey.

In the kingdom of God forgiveness is not so much a soft and fuzzy sentimental act. It is an act of will. Forgiveness in God's economy means deciding to cancel an outstanding debt.

Forgiveness means wiping the books clean and giving or receiving a zero sum balance. When we are holding an emotional balance sheet full of someone else's transgressions, we are bound to them in a life draining way. Forgiving another's debt frees the forgiver to live again.

Now to be very clear God doesn't say we *ever* have to let someone hurt us *again and again*. Women and children in physically or emotionally abusive situations have been especially hurt by this backward view too many times.

But even in cases where the person who has hurt us is dangerous or unrepentant--- *our* forgiveness gives *us* the real emotional distance from them that we've sought, but missed by keeping their indebtedness on our books.

And I think another reason that we get so confused or bent up around today's parable is that we have lost track of our vocabulary. When we hear the prodigal, we believe it means dissolute, wild or sinful.

But if you Google it or go home and look it up in the dictionary you will find that prodigal primarily means wastefully extravagant; it is synonymous with lavish, abundant, profuse---it means giving or given in abundance!

With this new understanding of the word prodigal we should be alerted that there is more than one prodigal in this family. Who is the other prodigal in this heartbreaking tale? _____!

Isn't it the father? Isn't the father's love for this wastrel son recklessly extravagant? Is not this loving parent both giving and yielding profusely? Above all isn't God's love for us given in wasteful abundance?

Prodigal love, God's love, is the love of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is the love that comes whether we deserve it or not. This is the love that heals us, makes us whole, mends the brokenness, and in short reconciles us to each other, God, and to our very selves.

This is the love that has the power to wipe out the echo of those slamming doors, hateful words, and bitter cries. This is the power of the love that heals our families as well as relationships within our families of faith.

To forgive requires us to confront our pain and hurt and shame with deep honesty and then take the bold step of offering an invitation to the other that has hurt us. And even if the gift is rejected or wildly undeserved, the giver is reunited with his or her very soul.

And for those of us who are the elder sons of the piece, resentful and cold at such a display of extravagant love for the undeserving we have to listen more closely to Jesus' story.

In the midst of the party filled with laughter, warmth and joy that this beloved child that was lost has been found, the father leaves this rejoicing to rush out into the cold darkness to meet his resentful son who is himself also very lost.

The father pleads with him, loving him more than this angry child will ever allow himself to know. He lives at the heart of God's reckless love for him everyday yet refuses to claim this abundance. The younger son only wasted his father's money; isn't it possibly a greater sin to waste the father's grace and love?

There was a man who had two sons...whether we are the wastrel or the resentful child in our own faith journey, we must admit that both are lost.

Whether we have lost ourselves in the far country of selfish living or the far country of resentment that God's mercy includes even those we reject, be we the Pharisees or the sinners they disdain, God is waiting for all of us; out of a love that knows no bounds God constantly scanning the horizon for any little glimpse that we are coming home again. Amen.