

Year C Lent 4 The Compassionate Father of the Prodigal Son Luke 15 v1 to 3 and 11b to 32

Jesus is attracting the rejected of society...all those whom the Pharisees and the scribes don't want to touch with a 10-foot pole are gathered around, eagerly listening to Jesus of Nazareth. Not only were traitors and sinners hanging out close by, Jesus was eating with them. That's simply just not done. No self-respecting person should lower himself to that level, allow himself to become unclean. Jesus hears their disgusted grumbling and whollops them with a story. These religious leaders who think they know all about God and who think they know all about *who* God welcomes and who God rejects, they get schooled on what God is really like and, well, so do we.

We know God welcomes sinners and invites them to his table. We accept the dinner invitation every week. But do we really understand the extent of God's grace? Do we really believe God's grace extends to all who ask? Do we really believe that we are worthy of God's love? Or do we think we are miserable, unworthy sinners who need our weekly dose of grace in order to become better people, acceptable to God?

In today's story we meet up with a young man described by Jesus in such a way that we have no doubt he is most definitely a sinner...one of *those* people passing the bread at Jesus' table. This young man seriously insults his father by asking him for his share of his inheritance while his father is still alive. The father, contrary to society's rules, acts out of love and gives this son the money. This young son then further insults his father and his older brother by leaving them. It's as if the young man is saying, "I can't wait until my father is dead and I really

don't like being here with you guys so, now that I have the means, I'm getting out of here for somewhere better."

He quickly squanders all of his money. The older brother tells us that he spent it all on prostitutes although there certainly would have been some drunken, all-you-can-eat feasts in there as well. Left with nothing and facing a food shortage in the foreign place he had chosen as his new home, this young man gets a job looking after pigs. For a Jewish person, feeding pigs would have been bad enough but, to actually wish he could join the pigs at the trough, that tells us just how low he had sunk into his shameful life. At this point, the young man "comes to himself." We actually do not know if he repents – the story doesn't say that. All we know is that the young man realizes he was better off with his father. He composes his "I am unworthy, please take me back" speech and heads off for home. The father sees the son coming and doesn't even wonder about his motivation for coming home. The father, again contrary to society's rules, runs to meet his son (dignified men did not run) and, again acting only out of love, embraces his son and kisses him before the son has uttered a single word. The son begins his rehearsed speech but the father, not needing to hear the "I'm sorry's" cuts him off and, instead, joyfully fully restores this son to his place in the family and prepares the celebratory feast.

There is a children's Christian teaching series of videos called Veggie Tales and I will share some wisdom of Bob the Tomato because, yes, Veggie Tales has a video for the Prodigal Son. Junior Asparagus plays the role of Darby who works on his dad's farm. Darby steals all of his college money from his dad, runs away from home, and blows the money at the amusement park. Bob explains to Larry the

Cucumber that “Darby did this because he thought it would make him happier, but being away didn't make him happier and after what he did, he was afraid to come back, afraid that his dad wouldn't love him anymore. Bob tells Larry that the story of the Prodigal Son is about how much God loves everyone. Jesus told that story to teach us something about God.” So, what does this story teach us about God? In amazingly wise words from a plump and shiny red fruit that most mistakenly call a vegetable we hear: “God's love has no limits, it goes on forever, no matter what you've done, no matter how far you've run away, you can always come back to God, and when he sees you coming, he'll pick you up and he'll just keep hugging you” (from *The Wonderful Wizard of Ha's* by the Veggie Tales).

What a great image: no matter what we have done, God accepts us when we turn back to him. God picks us up and just keeps on hugging us. That is very reassuring for us as sinners. But there is more to learn from this story because there is more to us and there is most definitely more to God. We have another brother to check out.

The older son appears to be a little lost as well, although he never left home. Nobody bothers to come tell him the news and invite him to join the welcome home party for his little brother. As this older brother is making his way in from working in the field, he hears the sound of the party with music and dancing. Strangely, rather than continue his way into the house, the son calls a slave to come to him and tell him what's going on. He becomes angry and refuses to go into the house. His father must've been informed of this because he comes out to the son – again, contrary to the rules of society and acting out of love.

The older son does not address his father as “Father” and he does not call the younger brother his brother but, rather, refers to him as his father’s son. He angrily rails at the unfair way he has been treated. He has worked hard, always obedient, and he has never been rewarded. He does not think it’s right that his father has welcomed back the wayward son and is treating him like royalty.

The father’s answer to his oldest son is Jesus’ answer to the grumbling scribes and Pharisees we met earlier and it is also Jesus’ answer to us. Matt Skinner writes, “[The older] son cannot see the situation in any way but according to his own conventions of justice and through the torments of the lack of appreciation he suffers. The father’s response to the younger son utterly confounds the rules, doctrines, and convictions that confine the elder son” (workingpreacher.org). Skinner goes on to say that, “many of us need to be brought to the realization that, deep down, we tend to reckon things in similar ways, according to similar standards of fairness and belonging” (workingpreacher.org). We often fall into the trap of thinking we know who God will accept and who God will condemn and we prejudge those people as if it’s a done deal. The older son does seem to have a legitimate gripe in this situation...if you operate by the world’s way of thinking, that is.

Jesus sets us, and the scribes and Pharisees straight. We should have learned our lesson last week – God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways are not our ways, says Isaiah. The Father in our story today, continuously tosses out society’s way of thinking and does his own thing, completely motivated by love and compassion: he gives his youngest son his share of the inheritance, he runs to greet him, he doesn’t care why he has returned only that he *has* returned. There

are many who have very firm ideas about who is “in” God’s kingdom and who is “out.” To be blunt, those ideas need to be tossed. Jesus tells us today that everyone who turns to God is embraced by God. Everyone.

Everyone is in need of God’s grace – even the rule-following scribes and Pharisees, and church-goers, even the hard-working, obedient brother is very much in need of God’s grace because, like many of us, he has passed judgement and gotten it wrong. The father’s answer to his older son is full of grace. He names him as “son” even though he hadn’t been given the respect of being named “father.” He tells his son to open his eyes and notice he has been given everything. He is not a slave, he is a co-owner. He does not need to be resentful of what is being given to others. And that’s where Jesus ends the story – at a cliff-hanger. We do not know if the older son accepts the dinner invitation or remains resentful of who else was invited to dinner. We are not told because the choice is always ours to make. We stand on the lawn, outside the house, listening to the party on the inside, a mix of the younger, sinful son and the older rule-following judgemental son. What do we do? Paul, today, is extremely helpful in letting us know, clearly, what choice we should be making.

Paul tells us that, through the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are, in the power of the Spirit, becoming a new creation. We have been reconciled to God. And because of that we are called to be “ambassadors” of reconciliation. Paul uses the concept of “reconciliation” five times in six verses. As a new creation we have come to see that we are all one in Christ and Paul drives home the point – we must actively reconcile and be reconciled. To be reconciled doesn’t simply mean to smooth over differences, to get over disagreements.

Reconciliation is restoring balance, bringing together what was separated – truly being one body.

Like the father in the story and like Jesus who told it – we now stand in those shoes. God's abundant love and mercy has been lavished on us. Through Christ, God is reconciling all things to himself and we have agreed to be a part of that. God's love is our gift to lavish on others. And so, as we stand on the lawn listening to the party, we are not only a mix of the younger, sinful son and the older, judgemental son, we are the father too. Despite our imperfections, we are called to be Christ's righteousness.

As we stand on the lawn together let us recall that the older son was angry because the father had a dinner for the younger son. But the dinner wasn't the son's, the dinner was the father's. He killed a fatted calf which meant there was food for everyone in the household: family, extended family, and workers. Each week, in our celebratory feast with the Father, we join the entire household of God throughout the world, across all time. We are not individuals simply taking the weekly dose of grace, magically wrapped up in a little pill we call a wafer. Our Eucharist together is the remembrance of God's grace already lavished on us through Christ's death. It is the joyful celebration of the feast in God's kingdom that we have already been made a part of through our baptisms when we shared in Christ's death and resurrection. It is the recognition and renewal of the amazing gift of our reconciliation with God already accomplished in Christ. And it is the reconciliation with all others around us who share in this oneness through Christ. Entrusted with God's message of reconciliation we celebrate and rejoice.