

## Higher Righteousness

Luke 15: 11 - 32

Makemie Presbyterian Church

February 8, 2009

11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 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.

13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had & traveled to a distant country, & there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country & he began to be in need. 15 So he went & hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up & go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."'

20 So he set off & went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him & was filled with compassion; he ran & put his arms around him & kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven & before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—put it on him; put a ring on his finger & sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf & kill it, & let us eat & celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead & is alive again; he was lost & is found!' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; & when he came & approached the house, he heard music & dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves & asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, & your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe & sound.'

28 Then he became angry & refused to go in. His father came out & began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, & I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

<sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me & all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate & rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead & has come to life; he was lost & has been found.'"

This ends the reading.

In the late Middle Ages, as sermons began to be given in the common language instead of Latin, the English word *lent* was adopted. This word initially meant *spring* because in the spring the days visibly lengthen.

Lent, is the forty days of prayer before Easter.<sup>1</sup> This forty days represent the time Jesus spent in the desert, where according to the Bible he endured temptation by Satan.<sup>1</sup>

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes on the Saturday before Easter. The six Sundays in Lent are not counted among the forty days because each Sunday represents a "mini-Easter", a celebration of Jesus' victory over sin and death.<sup>[2]</sup>

Because we are in the season of Lent and today is the first of six Sundays, our text is about the celebration of victory over sin. So we will look at this parable of forgiveness and also talk some about the early church fathers.

Now one reason the parable of the prodigal son remains lively after some 2000 years of interpretation is because it is so amoral.

- 1) The son's\* return home has nothing to do with loving or missing his family. He comes home because he is dying of hunger.
- 2) His father forgives him before he ever gets a word of repentance out of his mouth.
- 3) The older brother is made out to be the villain when the fact is that his baby brother has come to live on his—the elder brother's—share of what's left of the family fortune.

Once the affair is over & the prodigal comes home, the roast goes straight into the oven. All is forgiven, before any apology is offered. The wages of sin is a lavish party for the sinner. Is this really a story we want our children to learn in Sunday school?

It has been an offensive story all its life. Tertullian, an early defender of the faith, insisted that the parable of the prodigal son must never apply to Christians. If it did, he said, then not only “adulterers & fornicators” but also “idolaters, blasphemers, and renegades” would use the parable to pardon their sin. “Who will worry about losing what can so easily be regained?” he asked, and others agreed with him—especially those who had to decide what to do with Christians who had knuckled under to the Romans.

If you were an early Christian living in the Roman Empire, chances were good that you would sooner or later find yourself standing in front of an altar to Caesar, with several scary looking soldiers in metal hats inviting you to put a pinch of incense on the coals of that altar. If you said no thank you, you’d rather not do that, they would let you know that you either did it or you died—and not only you, but also every member of your household, whom they just happened to have in custody.

Under such circumstances quite a few Christians worshipped Caesar (at least for that one day of their lives) & when they tried to return to the fellowship of Christians they often found their ways barred. Novatian, a near contemporary of Tertullian, allowed that while God certainly had the power to forgive such apostasy, the church should not—indeed, could not—re-admit them to the body of Christ without a long & public period of humiliation. If the church really was Christ's body, Novatian reasoned, then it was supposed to be without sin. To welcome a tainted person back into fellowship was to defile the whole body. They might as well put a little hepatitis B in the communion cups the next Sunday as do something like that.

Tertullian & Novatian were not unopposed in their views. Interestingly enough, the people who argued the other side were mostly pastors & bishops (did I mention that Tertullian was a lawyer?). Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the 4th century, said that to deny anyone-Christian or not—the hope of forgiveness was to make them wanderers & exiles on the earth. Why should anyone ever repent of anything, he said, if they knew they could never go home again?

Gregory of Nazianus, also a bishop in the fourth century, went

straight for the purists' shriveled hearts. "Do you not accept repentance?" he asked them. "Do you not shed a tear of mercy? I hope you may not encounter such a judge as yourself!" He took special exception to Novatian's teaching that there was a hierarchy of sins, whereby material greed, for instance, was forgivable, but sexual transgression was not. "You sound as if you yourself were not made of flesh & blood," Gregory said in reply. "Come on, stand here on our side, on the side of human beings."

Gregory has zeroed in on something very important here. Where we stand has everything to do with how we hear the parable of the prodigal son. Those of us who have done unforgivable things in our lives—who have broken solemn vows, betrayed sacred trusts, who have hurt the people we love so badly that we have knocked the wind right out of them—we know what it is like to watch those people struggle for breath, while we wait for the words we so richly deserve: "Damn you to hell forever." When those words don't come, however, \*when the people who have suffered because of us rise up on one elbow & say, "I'm forgiving you for that"—well, that is when true repentance usually begins—not before the pardon but after it—which is why we will defend this story to the death.

The people who find it offensive tend to be those who, through heroic discipline or complete lack of imagination, have never broken any of the 10 commandments. They have never left home. They have never squandered their inheritance. They have never abandoned their responsibilities & not all of them are insufferable about it, either. Some of them sound genuinely sad about what they have missed. They wish they could do what other people do—just go for the gusto & deal with the wreckage later--sin boldly that grace may abound—only they can't seem to do that. Faith has to count for something, they explain. It has to be more than talk. If Jesus did not mean for people to live more virtuous lives, then why did he keep calling them to follow him? Someone has to give it a try.

If we can resist the temptation to reduce either of the two brothers in this story to stereotypes—the fun-loving younger brother who finally learns his lesson versus the sour older brother who has never taken a risk—then we may be able to recognize that we need them both as much as they need each other. Each of them embodies at least half of what the gospel is all about. As long as they remain estranged, neither of them can live whole lives.

The younger brother lives entirely by grace. Having dishonored

his father, emptied his trust fund & all but starved to death, he has weighed his options & discovered only two: stay where he is & finish starving to death or go home & beg his father to take him back. When the old man surprises him by running to meet him—a dishonored father, running to meet the boy who did him wrong?—there is no doubt what forgiveness looks like, nor how much it costs. The younger brother lives entirely by his father's grace. Will anyone tell him he is wrong?

The older brother, meanwhile, lives entirely by obedience to his father. The theological word is righteousness—or, if that is too musty for you—rightness. The older brother has devoted his entire life to being the very best—the most right—son he can be. He has never left his father's side. He has never gone against his father's wishes. He has been loyal, respectful, hardworking and honest. Will anyone tell him he is wrong?

Unfortunately, the way this parable is usually handled, you would think his father did, but that's not so. The father has nothing but words of love for either of his sons. In the face of his younger son's remorse, he orders his servants to dress the boy like a prince. In the face of his older son's despair, he says, "Son, you are always with

me, & all that is mine is yours.”

This man refuses to choose between his children. All of his energy is focused on getting them back together again, since each of them has something the other badly needs. If the younger son is going to survive, he badly needs some of his older brother’s discipline & devotion. If the older son is going to survive, he badly needs some of his younger brother’s brokenness & humility.

There are no heroes or villains here, just two brothers who have grown up as mirror images of each other. All their lives they have defined themselves by their difference from one another. (Who am I? Well, I’ll tell you one thing, I’m not like him!) While this polarity has provided the family with a perverse kind of balance, the father knows it is time to break the glass. He does this by tipping the balance toward the younger son—the sinner—not because the boy is better in any way but simply because he has come home. “We had to celebrate & rejoice,” the father explains to his stung elder son, “because this brother of yours was dead & has come to life; he was lost & has been found.”

This puts the burden of a happy ending squarely on the shoulders of the older son. No one even remembered to invite him to

the party, mind you. He did not know one thing about it until he came home from a full day in the field to the sound of music & dancing. According to his father, however, the party is not really about the younger son. It is really a family reunion--or at least the possibility of a family reunion—if only the elder brother will come inside the house.

In order to do that, of course, he will have to make a choice—between being right & being in relationship with his family—which, as you know if you've ever tried it, can be a wrenching choice to make. Do you dismiss your own airtight case & go inside, just so you will have someone to eat Thanksgiving with for the rest of your life? Or do you stay outside in the yard, where the air is cool & clear, while everyone else is hugging & kissing inside the house?

Remember that the family crime in this story is not addiction, sexual or physical abuse. It is undue forgiveness. It is undeserved love. That's what the elder brother will condone if he walks through the door of that house—not his brother's behavior but his father's love. In order to remain part of the family, he will have to make peace with the amorality of that love—either that or leave home himself, in which case he becomes the new prodigal son.

I don't know if you have ever noticed, but there is something

about having only two choices that can absolutely paralyze you. Often, when a third choice materializes, it comes as a gift straight from God. The elder brother's third choice, I think, is to redefine righteousness--to abandon the lower righteousness (of being right all alone in the yard) for the higher righteousness (of embracing the wrongdoer)—not because it makes sense, or serves justice, or sends a proper message to anyone about facing the consequences of their actions—but because it is what the father does. The father embraces wrongdoers. The father welcomes sinners home, even at risk of losing obedient sons & daughters who can't or won't do the same.

“Come on,” the father says to his elder son, “stand here on our side, on the side of human beings.”

As I said at the start, this piece of the Gospel has not always gone down well with the church. We have argued about it for two thousand years & I expect we will continue to argue about it for two thousand more. We are so afraid of letting people off the hook. We are so resentful of unearned love. Unless we happen to be the ones toward whom the father is running, with his arms wide open and tears wetting his beard. Amen.