

**Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent (RCL Lectionary, Year C)
March 14th, 2010**

[Joshua 5:9-12](#) / [Psalm 32](#) / [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#) / [Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32](#)

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I mean can you believe this, how unfair. All I've done my whole life is obey my father and work this farm. And what have I gotten out of it, I'll tell you what ..tired muscles and a sore back that's what. My rotten little bother comes back after deserting his duties, disrespecting our family and wasting his inheritance and what do they do...they honor him with the fatted calf, the finest fair and a party. No one has ever offered to host a dinner party in my honor oh no. I've never gotten to wear that robe, all I get is work. It is just not fair..where is my justice?

Brrr... it sure is getting chilly out here and it does look warm and inviting in there don't you think? I am really hungry, smell that meat roasting and look at all those sweets. They have even brought out the fine wine, a glass of that would taste incredible right now. Maybe Father is right, I should go in and join the party. After all he is my brother. No, no I won't it's just not fair. I refuse to celebrate his return at my expense.

If we are being honest with ourselves, how many of us don't feel this way at times. We are the elder son left wondering where our justice is in the face of what we see as unwarranted assistance or the request for help for the "other". But if we take a closer look at the story where does this leave the character? Isn't he left standing out in the chill, isolated in his sense of righteousness, forgoing the bounty of riches offered to all?

Who is really hurt by his actions? I am sure his father and brother are disappointed that he doesn't join them, but he is the one left suffering. In viewing the world from a theology of scarcity he prevents himself from partaking in what was clearly a wonderful event, a feast of food and love for his returning brother; a chance to celebrate God's gift of family.

Was an injustice truly done? His father is quick to remind his elder son that all he sees, all the father has remains his. No promise has been broken, no riches denied. Nothing is being taken from his son; he has and will receive all that is promised to him. Nothing being offered the returning son comes at his expense.

Indeed, the younger son is being welcomed back home, back into the love of his family but his inheritance is not being restored. In loving and forgiving his wayward son, no less love and forgiveness is afforded the remaining son. Out of the theology of abundance justice is indeed being served, justice and compassion for all involved.

In this story, painted a bit simplistically, we want to see ourselves as the prodigal son, the forgiven one welcomed back into God's arms and the benefactor of the celebration. In this season of lent, in our time of reflection and searching it feels secure and comforting.

Knowing that God, like the father, continues to scan the horizon for us when we've lost our way and on seeing us from afar rushes out to meet us with outstretched arms and forgiving words surrounds us with hope. On that level, the parable assures us that through grace and love all we need to do is seek forgiveness and we are forgiven, restored to Christ's family.

It is also a parable of abundance over scarcity, of the responsibilities in being part of Christ's family and yes of discerning who are brothers and sisters in Christ are. What do I mean by this, isn't it obvious who the family in this parable is? Not necessarily, obvious and Jesus are not words easily linked in the same sentence. It is easy to forget how subversive Jesus was and remains today.

When I first read today's pericope I thought the opening lines a bit odd, why not just start with the parable itself. Yet these lines set the context of the action, they frame the story. The tax-collectors and sinners (the outcasts of society) were gathering to listen to Jesus. While the Pharisees and the scribes (the religious insiders, the established society) grumbled over Jesus inclusion of them; his audacity at sharing table fellowship with these outcasts and sinners.

For in Jesus' culture table fellowship was a serious matter. One only ate with those of acceptable and equal honor and place. To eat with someone was to give your approval to that person, to wholly accept them. In welcoming and eating with these sinners and outcasts, Jesus is making it clear that all who believe, all who desire are part of God's family, our family. It is a gentle reminder that we as the established Church, the dominate culture are now the Pharisees and scribes or our day.

It prompts us to ask: Are we grumbling as the Pharisees and scribes of old, judging who is and who isn't worthy of eating at our table? Are we acting out of a theology of scarcity as the elder brother seeing the resources given to the other as a personal loss, somehow diminishing us rather than an opportunity to celebrate family and the enrichment of all including ourselves?

Are we like so many these days stuck in a win/loss world view that places the individual paramount to the community, to God's family? Or can we rise to the example of the welcoming father who proclaimed: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But 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." Are we scanning the horizons for our lost sisters and brothers searching for their return, ready to welcome them home with a celebration of shared riches?

Lent is a time of reflection, of taking stock of ourselves and our relationship to God. It is not about beating ourselves up or feeling guilty. It is about clearing away those behaviors, thoughts, and fears that keep us from God. It is about visioning a new way of being Christ's family and the continuing call of creating God's kingdom on earth.

It is a stark reminder that it is not what we do on Sunday that makes us Christians but what we do Monday through Saturday. Jesus calls us to be disciples, to go out into the world spreading his love and message with our actions and our words. Church, our fellowship together, is important and wonderful but it was never intended to be the pinnacle of our faith but the source of our energy in equipping us to go out into the world.

We are called to be the disciples of our day. Christ died to turn the world upside down, to show us a new and better way. In the hustle and bustle of our daily lives it is easy to lose our way. To believe the nay-sayers that proclaim God's kingdom on earth is not possible, who laugh that it is a naïve and silly dream.

I admit that there are moments when I am so overwhelmed with today's news, with the heartless words I hear proclaimed that I feel like this. But then I see Christ's love in the face of a child, hear God's voice in the laughter of my sisters and brothers and know that it is real, it is possible. I am reminded that God waits like the patient father, scanning the horizon, forgiving and welcoming.

It is up to us. We are God's people. So on this Sunday in Lent, as you prepare to come to the table, to share in Christ's fellowship: I invite you to ask yourself what is keeping you from God? What fears and stumbling blocks can you leave on the altar rail, can you hand to Christ as you meet him here today? This church is so blessed with riches: riches of spirit and riches of assets. The love you have for one another shines within these walls. How much richer would we all be if we could shine as brightly outside our walls?