

Lent 4C 2016 Sermon

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. 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. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, '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.'"

Most of what I share with you today comes verbatim from Fr. John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 81-88)

“All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

Two different groups: tax collectors and sinners, and Pharisees and scribes. And Jesus tells a story in which a younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners, and an older son represents the Pharisees and scribes.

Jesus begins, *“There was a man who had two sons. 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.”*

Now in order to understand this parable it is crucial that we see how unusual this father is! In the culture of Jesus’ day, what the father does would never have happened. “The younger son insults his father by asking for his share of the inheritance,” writes John Shea. “Inheritances are only received when the patriarch dies, so to ask for it *before* his death is to implicitly desire that the father die. But instead of responding with offended honor and beating or banishing the son [which may well have been what a normal father in that culture would do], the father gives away everything he has, keeping nothing for himself. He gives it all to his two sons...

“This odd behavior, which will continue throughout the story, provides a clue to the interpretation of the story... The father represents the self-giving spiritual reality of God and the two sons symbolize two predicaments in which people find themselves. The younger son will be lost in sin and the older son will be lost in self-righteousness. But both are lost and have the mindsets to prove it. It is these mindsets that the father will have to work with and correct.” (pp. 81-82)

John Shea interprets the younger brother’s story in terms of the relational connection between him and his father. He writes: “...The son goes into a far country, abandoning his day-in day-out connection to home and father. Then he squanders the inheritance, his only remaining contact with his father. Immediately he experiences famine and need, [and] becomes a hireling... His situation, ‘no one gave him anything,’ is starkly contrasted with his situation in the home of his father who freely gave him whatever he had.

“...[T]his story... depicts the universal situation of people before God. If people take the gift of God but do not stay in touch with the Giver, they begin a process of dehumanization. Since they are no longer in touch with the Source of life, what little life they manage to take with them is quickly dissipated. Quite

literally, it dissolves, having no Source to refresh it. Therefore, this dissolute living leads to emptiness. In place of fullness there is famine... [People] are reduced to the physical level of life and defined by its unmet hungers.” (pp. 82-83)

Is this not true in the lives of many Americans, many of us? We **take** the gifts of God – we live in the richest nation on earth, after all – but we do not stay in touch with the Giver, the very Source of Life. The result is that there begins a process of dehumanization (revealed, I think, in some of the inhuman language and behavior of some politicians). Rather than live in the Heavenly Father’s abundance and love, we define ourselves by our unmet hungers, and our politicians play on those hungers.

In our Gospel story, the younger son “comes to himself,” saying, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger. I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

“...It is a script that acknowledges his sin, his straying from the Source of life,” Fr. Shea notes. “In fact, the confession of sin is so thorough that **he becomes** the sin. He imagines the full consequences of his sin are a permanent loss of sonship. He resigns himself to being treated like a hired hand. His sin has become his identity. He is no longer son; he is sinner.” (p. 83)

While he is still a long way away from his father’s house, his father sees him and is filled with compassion. He runs and throws his arms around his younger son and kisses him. Then the son says the lines he has been rehearsing, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ Fr. Shea reflects:

“The lost son makes the first move. He turns and moves toward the father. But that is all he needs to do. He does not have to walk the whole way home, the humiliation of his sin and the fierceness of his need driving each step. ‘While he was still far off, his father saw him . . .’ The reason his father sees him is that he has been keeping vigil, waiting and watching. At the sight of his son, the father’s heartfelt compassion . . . moves him so completely that he runs, embraces, and kisses. It is hard to overestimate the emotional force of these three sequential actions. They combine to create a picture of overwhelming love and reconciliation.

“Humans have to turn back to God, but they do not have to *crawl* back. Divine love meets them *more* than halfway. Grace is a proactive energy that **seeks** whoever is willing to be *found*. But when the identification with sin is strong, the welcome of grace *can* be resisted...” (pp. 83-84)

But the father does not engage or respond to his son's negative thinking. His son wants to be taken back as a hired hand, and the father will **not** relate to him in that way. "He is to be visibly reinstated as a son with robe, ring, and shoes. Then the fatted calf is to be killed and the entire community is to celebrate. All this has to be done quickly, [for it] **has** to reverse the negative thinking in his son's head that already has had too much time to develop." (p. 84)

The scene next shifts to the elder son in the field. "As the younger son represented the tax collectors and sinners but was also a universal type, so the older son represents the scribes and the Pharisees but is also a universal type. ... The older son is a worker. He does not come to the house of his father from famine in a far country but from laboring in the fields. ...[But he] does not immediately go in. He is suspicious, and when he finds out what is going on, he is angry. His refusal to go in and join the celebration is [in that society] an insult [to his father] – an insult on a par with asking for the inheritance while the father is still alive. But the father who ran toward **one** lost son now comes out after the *other* lost son. This father does not let insult turn him away." (pp. 84-85)

The older son complains that his younger brother is getting what he doesn't deserve, while he – who has worked and "slaved" for his father all along – has not been properly rewarded. (Do we not hear the same complaint in our own country when those who have worked hard begrudge any mercy, any grace to refugees or the poor?)

Fr. Shea remarks about the older son: "He sees himself as a slave and his father as one who issues commands. He has obeyed these commands but not with the full heart of a son. He works with the calculating mind of a slave, wanting to be paid for his labor. But he sees himself as underpaid and his father as so stingy that he keeps him from celebrating with his friends. Therefore, he lives with a smoldering resentment that has now come to the surface and demands the attention of his father. 'Listen!' This is the speech of a self-pitying man who thinks he has been treated unfairly, while his profligate younger brother has been treated indulgently..."

"[But the] father does not share the older son's rendition of their relationship. From the *father's* point of view, the important thing is that they have always been together and the father has held nothing back from him. At the start of the story, the father divided and shared *all he had* with both sons. But the older son has not focused on the presence and self-giving of the Father. Instead, he has fabricated a demanding father who withholds love from the one who deserves it while giving love to the one who does not deserve it. Although there has been **no** inequality or favoritism, this is the inner world the older brother inhabits." (p. 85)

Tragically, both sons see themselves in the role of "hired hand," rather than "son". The younger son "obsesses on his mistake, allowing it to hold him tighter and tighter. Although the **father** shows *no* signs of holding on to it, the son is not able

to let [his mistake] go.” (p. 86) He has come to identify with his sin, and his father has to rush to do all the outward things he can to encourage him to let go of his identification with his mistake and affirm his true identity as “son.”

The older son’s mindset *also* needs to be changed. “As a representative of the scribes and the Pharisees, his way of thinking particularly afflicts those who see themselves as righteous. The book of Deuteronomy chastises the Jews ‘because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything’ (Deut 28:47). When our consciousness cannot stay focused on the abundance of God and creation and, therefore, serve the Lord in joy and gladness, other motivations emerge. The first and foremost is reward. We work for our own profit...

“Working for external rewards and not out of inner abundance eventually brings us into the emotional state of resentment. Resentment is built on comparison and a perceived inequality. The older brother evaluates himself in relation to his younger brother and, not surprisingly, comes off favorably. **He** has *obeyed* his father’s commands and his brother has squandered the father’s living with whores. These are the hard facts that cannot be denied.

“However, these calculations are not part of the Father’s equation. The running Father is the symbol of divine grace; and grace is grace is grace is grace. It just gives to whoever is able to receive it. When the reward-driven mind encounters this indiscriminate grace, it regards it as unjust because it is not playing the game of merit. It erupts in a red-hot blast of resentment. There may be many fine points to this story that people do not understand. But *everyone* gets it when the older brother explodes. We instinctively understand him because his mindset is deeply embedded in each of us.

“The revelation of God as grace *should* make us **rejoice**. But before we can celebrate, we must deal with the mindsets that the appearance of grace uncovers. We are attached to our past sins, and so cannot quite believe we are sons and daughters of love. This keeps us from joy. We also are alienated from the simple presence of abundance, and so we work for reward and find ourselves resentful and envious. **This** keeps us from joy. Only when we break the stranglehold of these two blocking mindsets will we hear the music in the house and know that we are home” in God’s lavish grace and love. (pp. 87-88)

AMEN