

## Lent 4C 2022 Sermon

### Luke 15:1-3, 11b-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.'"*

A modern Biblical scholar writes: "Two things are generally known about Jesus of Nazareth that are beyond historical doubt, and they are known around the world by Christians and non-Christians alike. The one is that Jesus was crucified in the first century... The other is that he taught in parables."<sup>1</sup> Jesus didn't argue the fine points of the Jewish Law; he taught in parables, stories.

Let me recap *today's* parable: A man has 2 sons, and the younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance. Now, the audacity of that request is staggering! I cannot imagine ever asking my father, while he was still alive, for my share of the inheritance – could you? It is as if the younger son were saying to his father, “Your value to me is in the stuff that will be mine one day, not in you.”

Yet, amazingly, rather than exploding at this outrageous and hurtful request, the father agrees, and divides his property – while he is still alive – between his 2 sons. “The father gives everything he has, keeping nothing for himself.”<sup>2</sup>

The younger son goes off to a far country and squanders the inheritance in “dissolute living.” A famine then comes upon that country, and the younger son has nothing to eat. He remembers that his father’s hired hands have plenty to eat; he would be much better off as one of his father’s hired hands. So, he comes up with a plan of action: “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.’” In his own mind, his “sin has become his identity. He is no longer son; he is sinner.”<sup>3</sup>

But while he is still far off, his father sees him and is filled with compassion; he runs and puts his arms around him and kisses him. The son begins his speech: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son...” But the father doesn’t let him finish. He turns to his servants and says, “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 the celebration begins.

Meanwhile, the older son is out in the field, and when he comes toward the house, he hears the celebrating, and discovers that it is a feast being thrown for his good-for-nothing younger brother. He is angry, and refuses to enter the house – which, in its own way, is *also* an insult to his father. His father comes out and begins to plead with him. But he answers 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** comes back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you kill the fatted calf for him!” But his father replies, “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.”

That’s it. The End of the parable. Jesus draws no conclusions; offers no explanation or commentary, doesn’t tell us what the older son ends up doing. Jesus just tells the story. He knows that stories can speak at a deeper level than our analytical consciousness ever can.

Author Rob Bell points out that there are, in fact, 3 *different* stories being told *within* this parable. The father, the younger son, and the older son each has a different story they are telling.

Bell writes: “The younger brother tells... his version of his story, and as he heads home in shame after squandering his father’s money, he rehearses the speech he’ll give his father. He is

convinced he's 'no longer worthy' to be called his father's son. That's the story he's telling... [But] his father tells a different story. [A story] about return and [love, and joy]. [A story] about his being a son again...

"[And] the younger son has to decide whose version of his story he's going to trust: his [own] or his father's.

"[And the same is true] ... for the older brother. He... has *his* version of **his** [own] story."<sup>4</sup> "Although [the older brother] has stayed home," notes John Shea, "he has *not* stayed home *as a 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... 'Listen!' [he scolds his father.] 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. The question is: 'Does he have [the story] right, [is he describing reality, the truth about his father and his father's motivations], or is this a skewed and self-righteous [story he has been telling himself, over and over again, in his mind]?"

"From the father's point of view, the important thing is that [he and his older son] have always been together and the father has held nothing back from him. ['Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours,' the father says.] ...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."<sup>5</sup> This is the story the older brother tells.

"What the **father** does is *retell* the older brother's story," Rob Bell notes..., "[j]ust as he did with the younger brother. 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.' The question, then, is the same question that confronted the younger brother—will he trust **his** version of his story or his father's version of his story?"<sup>6</sup>

My friends, in our world today, a Russian dictator tells stories to his people on state-run television, and these stories are appropriated by Russian citizens who hear no other stories. In our world today, you and I hear partisan news channels or partisan politicians tell stories of how awful or stupid some member of this or that political party is, or how **our** hard-earned money is being used for the benefit of people who – like the prodigal son – don't deserve it.

And we must decide whether these stories become our stories.

My friends, the stories we tell ourselves are powerful! Though they mostly operate at an unconscious level, stories determine how we interpret the world, interpret our lives and the lives of those around us. Psychotherapist Mary Pipher... "says that people come to her with 'problem saturated' stories and she tries to move them to different stories that will give them a sense of control and pride."<sup>7</sup> She sees her role as a therapist as helping people edit their own stories.

What stories do you and I tell ourselves – about who we are as individuals, or as members of this or that group – our religion, our political party, our nation? What stories do we tell ourselves about other people, or about God? Are the stories we tell ourselves true, or are they – like the

stories each of the 2 sons in our parable tells himself – skewed and twisted, stories we have made up in creating our own reality rather than synchronizing and harmonizing with God’s Reality, God’s story, *The Story*?

My friends, *true* stories are not made up; they are discovered. At various times in our lives, you or I might be the younger brother or the older brother in today’s parable, each telling a story of our own making, a skewed story, an inaccurate story that does not resonate with the Reality of the world that our Loving Heavenly Father has created and continues to sustain and infuse with his Spirit. So often, our individual stories about who we are are made up by our ego selves, our small selves, our petty selves; they do not reflect the Big Story, *The Story*, God’s story about who God is and who we are in relationship to God, to one another, and to the world.

Stories are so important, my friends, and perhaps there is no better time than Lent to ask, “What stories are we telling ourselves? Are they life-giving stories, or toxic stories? Stories that the kingdoms of this world have manufactured, or stories of the Kingdom of God which our souls have discovered?”

Sunday after Sunday, we gather together to hear again the Gospel Story, the Big Story, the Story of a heavenly Father who, no matter what we have done or not done, always claims us as his beloved daughter or son; a Father who is always with us, and has given us the whole inheritance: all that he has, and all that he is.

Can we believe that story is true, and claim it as our own?

AMEN

- 1 Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000, p. 1
- 2 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 82
- 3 Shea, *ibid.* p. 83
- 4 Bell, Rob. *Love Wins* (Enhanced Edition) (p. 165). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.
- 5 Shea, *ibid.*, p. 85
- 6 Bell, *ibid.*, p. 169
- 7 David Brooks, “Is Self-Awareness a Mirage?”, New York Times, Sept. 16, 2021