

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

6Feb16

### WELCOME & SERMON #1 (LuKe 15:1-2)

Now for something completely different.

There's so much in the parable of the Prodigal Son that we're going to break it apart. Maybe when it comes around again in three years I'll take it as a whole ball of wax. But today it seems worth living into the various aspects and attitudes. Plus, there's the added benefit of being able to tell your family and friends, "I got to hear 7 sermons this week!" Who wouldn't want to be able to claim that? \*

This first piece we might take as a welcome to worship and an introduction to this experience. As you arrive here, you may identify with the sinners, having been beratedly told or having your own suspicious feeling that all is not right in your life. Or you may be more like the grumblers, who claim to have it all figured out in doing the right thing, in spite of everyone else.

Either way, what Jesus has to say today in this gathering is for you. Though we each have our own details and stories and abilities and short-comings, we also arrive in the same boat, turning again to the waters of baptism, expecting, needing a word of grace.

### SERMON #2 (LuKe 15:3, 11b-16)

It's a nice Kyrie in ELW setting 8, isn't it? Besides the catchy tune, it also helps expand our view. The typical versions still make reference to our relationships with God and with each other and for ourselves. Even that most simple phrase, "Kyrie eleison—Lord, have mercy" could capture all of our need. Yet this version intentionally expands our vision to our homes and justice issues, and work and play, and this gathering and the whole world, and all of it commended to God in prayer.

Briefly, I might jump in over my head on conversations on mercy. What we sang sure doesn't seem like begging to an angry God who is apt to punish or going to withhold goodness. This isn't mercy as relenting from meting out a harsh guilty verdict. Maybe the reverse, this mercy is apparent in its French origin, *merci*, reminding us of the gratitude for God having offered so much to us and continuing to strive for our wellbeing. It is not fearsome but a blessed thing to be at the mercy of God, mercy that matches other definitions of compassion for the unfortunate and seeking to alleviate distress. This points us to the beginning of Jesus' parable. \*

The younger son, figuring he was under his own power and at the mercy of nobody but himself, soon found out how much could go wrong—in squandering money and a catastrophic famine and lack of community support and even being stuck with the pigs, having to deal with what was both illegal and offensive to him.

For that wandering son, please understand; Jesus does not claim that if you stay at home close to God nothing will go wrong. Just the reverse, hearing this part of the reading still in the gathering portion of our service and along with that Kyrie, we understand how much we've seen go wrong. So we come here again to keep asking for protection and relief and guidance and blessing, in all the moments of our lives and for so much need in our world. And in spite of everything else, we continue to expect good from God. For that, let us pray to the Lord.

### SERMON #3 (LuKe 15:17-20a)

\* Depending on your perspective, you might find the son in this part of the parable to be conniving or humbly contrite or just desperate. Is he strategizing tactics to fill his belly? If so, we could observe desperation can drive either

toward ingenuity or deceitful acts. Or does he simply recognize that life was better and could be again, even if to a limited degree? That's not to be slighted. We might, for example, consider how those who have been incarcerated can be reintegrated into society. Things may never be how they once were, but they could be better.

We should also admit, though, that this son's remorse and sorrow could well be honest. Whether or not the relationship with his father can be re-established, there is some sense of longing in this son, to make amends and, at the very least, to confess. That is worded well in Psalm 32 that we just read, that sometimes we need to speak it aloud, to open ourselves up and disclose the hardship, just because it makes us suffer too much to keep it bottled up inside.

In a grander way, it's what we hear from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians (5:16-21), stunningly emphatic on reconciliation. This is the next part in the yearning for restored and whole relationships. And the template here is that our human point of view doesn't cut it. How we relate is not based on past hurts or on future potential. Trespasses cannot count against us, it says. We are called to see each other through the eyes of Jesus, or as the body of Christ, as a new creation, though we still sure look and feel like our old disappointing selves.

The reading says that for our sake, Jesus became sin so that we might become God's righteousness. Within the story, that says Jesus took the place of that lost and forsaken son. He identified with him, though it's hard for us to imagine Jesus as so offensive, as a desperate loser, a hungry philanderer, judged to be worthless. Yet in exchange for that shame—simply taking it away—Jesus offers a new beginning where it is all right and even that outcast lowlife is entrusted at the center of

God's operations as an ambassador, continuing to work for reconciliation.

#### CHILDREN'S MESSAGE \ SERMON #4 (Luke 15:20b)

Well, kids, I saved what I think is the best part of this whole story for you, because this is what I hope for you from your parents and families, and from this congregation and me at church, and in all kinds of places in life. And, most importantly, this is also what God always promises for you. \*

The son had done something wrong, but his dad didn't wait for him to say he was sorry. The son didn't have to do anything at all. His dad was just plain excited for him and loved him and wanted to give him a great big hug. God doesn't love you only because you do good things. God isn't proud of you only if you stop doing bad things. God loves you just because you exist and God is so excited to be around you and to hold onto you always.

At this part of the service with sermons, we're often looking for words to explain God or to try to teach. But before any of our words, God rushes up to say, "I love you!"

And God also trusts you to share that love with others. So go and give somebody a hug, maybe especially someone who doesn't expect it.

#### SERMON #5 (Luke 15:21-24)

*\*Amazing Grace* places these words on the son's lips, from his experience: "I once was lost but now am found." The father sees it more strongly still: "This son of mine was dead and is alive again." It's even more than recovery; this is a resurrection.

As we turn toward the peace and toward offering, we could see in this sense how we celebrate each other and how we offer our best

gifts. Indeed, the amazing word of "grace" has its root in the Greek "charis." Like "charismatic charity," it is about gifts we eagerly give for each other. God continues to lavish goodness on you—calf and robe and ring, clothing and rich food and identity—strictly as a gift, in the old words of the catechism "out of pure fatherly goodness, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all."

That, in turn, is what we also offer for the sake of each other. We share our gifts. We extend what has been offered to us. We practice being the new creations and ambassadors of reconciliation. We share peace. We offer love. We give away what has been given to us. Not because we need to, but because we can. And, God knows, we're worth it!

#### SERMON #6 (Luke 15:25-30)

This sermon piece may seem like an interruption, and that's exactly what it's supposed to be, exactly what happens with the older son at this point in the story. The celebrations are interrupted and questioned and resisted. \*

As we turn toward this table and the supper where we gladly proclaim that "all are welcome," we have to realize that the gracious and flagrant welcome has to offend, just as surely as a closed table bound by restrictions and rules would offend. As much as it is good news that you are welcome, you are invited, that this meal is for you, we have to realize there are some who wouldn't want somebody like you here, somebody your age or level of understanding, or with your doubts or your theology, or your clothes or education, or your background from this week or from earlier in life, or just because you don't seem to have done much to be very deserving.

And yet here is set a lavish feast, precisely and explicitly given "for you." The richest meal and most amazing table you could possibly be invited to, not because the abundance of fancy feast, but because the nourishment here is God's own blessing, the life of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit for you and soon in you.

This meal may be served to people with whom you wouldn't necessarily choose to relate. It may be served by hands that don't seem qualified or worthy or preferable. The question from the parable is whether you'll accept this great invitation, and if the joy you're invited to share is worth it, or whether you'll dig in your heels, wanting to besmirch or degrade others, and in pouting miss out.

The fatted calf has been killed. The Lamb of God has given himself for you and for all. All are welcome; are you coming?

#### BLESSING\SERMON #7 (Luke 15:31-32)

Here's the end. \* What strikes me this week is the great risk. Not that I'm still trying to preach in these last moments, but how risky this was for the father. In regaining one son who had been lost for dead, did he manage to lose the other one anyway? Did he anticipate that possibility? He also seems to be losing out on the hard worker in order welcome back the problem child, offending his honor student by honoring the delinquent.

It's a whole story of risk. We tend to slander the young son for the risk he took in leaving and then overlook the risk he was weighing in coming home. There's always a risk in the lavish party, the feast, in what we choose to celebrate and where we give our resources. The younger son we may call wasteful; the father we'd more likely term extravagant, or at least not stingy. That's constantly true in his devotion; it's risky. And the older son's

resistance to living that way, his refusal to join the celebration also has risks. His father has promised him everything, but will he so firmly turn away that he'll give up on it all and become as lost as his brother had been?

That may be the parting question today. You've risked being here, giving up yourself to the mercy of God, coming to celebrate a banquet that welcomes offenders and the snooty and you and any who'll enjoy it. As you prepare to go back into the week of encountering all kinds of Kyrie moments, of squandering and wrongs done and difficulties and longing so desperately for things to go right, it's in the reconciliation and the love and peace that you have to offer, to risk, and to receive. It's in putting God's love first and foremost in our attitudes and relationships, in seeing faces as God's good new creation, as celebrated just because that's the Kind of God we have.

Having been again reminded and attuned to that, having received again that assurance in worship, going now back into the world for which God risks God's self so extravagantly and so desperately, you have eyes to see and a life to risk with it as well.