

A Father's Love

Practicing Humility

Luke 15: 11-32

September 26, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

One of the truths this season of Covid 19 has taught me is that we are the church. The church is not simply a building; a place where we go to encounter God. God is present in the midst of every moment of our days, including our interactions with other people. And our faith is not simply a series of beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit. Our faith grows and expands when we “put feet” to our beliefs. When we practice what we believe. “Wisdom is not knowing what is right; wisdom is practicing what is right.” This morning I invite us to consider what it means to practice humility. Humility is the absence of pride or arrogance. Humility is the acceptance of the truth of who we are.

According to Jesus, sin takes two forms; sins of commission (the things we do to hurt ourselves, God and others) and omission (the things we neglect to do which also hurts ourselves, God and others). The sins of omission usually are motivated by our self-righteousness, our lack of humility and these sins of omission are more insidious. Both sins are described by Jesus in the parable he shares with his followers in Luke's Gospel –

the Parable of the Prodigal Son; or, I prefer, the Parable of the Two Sons.

Prayer for Understanding:

Read Luke 15: 11-32

Mahatma Gandhi, the great and wise Indian leader and promoter of peace, once told this story: A mother approached the Teacher for assistance with a domestic matter. “My son has horrible eating habits,” she said. “Please, he will listen to you if you tell him to stop eating foods with so much sugar.”

The Teacher listened sympathetically. “I ask that you come back next week and make the request again.”

The mother agreed and returned seven days later. “My son’s problem continues,” she said. “I am greatly concerned about his health. He rarely eats vegetables or fruits. Please, won’t you talk to him about the danger of eating too much sugar?”

“Please, come back and see me in a week,” the Teacher said simply.

Though the mother was disappointed, she left and returned one week later. Once again she made her plea. This time the Teacher agreed to talk with her son.

When the conversation was completed, the mother thanked the Teacher. “I am grateful that you took the time to talk to my son, but I don’t understand why it took three requests for you to do so.”

The Teacher looked at the woman and said, “I didn’t realize how hard it would be for me to give up sugar.” Humility affords us the opportunity to recognize our own sinfulness before we are so quick to see and judge the people around us and their sins. Jesus says:

Once there was a man who has two sons. Now this man owned a farm on which he earned his livelihood. In the Middle Eastern culture of Jesus’ day, this man’s sons were expected to help their father farm the land. Eventually, as was the custom, upon the father's death, the sons would inherit the farm and divide the wealth.

The days pass fairly peacefully until the younger son becomes obsessed with his own desires. Finally, acting upon those self-absorbed desires, the younger son demands his share of the inheritance, even though the father is by no means on his deathbed. His request is selfish, brash and aggressive. Not so brash for our day, perhaps, when children order their parents about and have the expectation that parents will take care of them financially well into adulthood. I call this the Entitlement Syndrome! Unusual in Jesus’ day, the younger son, who is so hungry to see the world that he wishes to see his father dead, at least symbolically. Sin can be defined as a turning away from God in pursuit of satisfying our own selfish agendas and desires. We can imagine how hurtful and how inexcusable the request was in the eyes of the community. The father has every right to explode in anger and discipline this brash younger son. In fact, some Jewish laws would allow for the rebellious son to be stoned.

Amazingly, the father complies with the son's request, recognizing all the while that his relationship with this young man who is his own flesh and blood, and not to mention the community's relationship with his son, will be severed. Apparently, the father values his child's freedom more than his own security and reluctantly he divides his livelihood and says goodbye. The younger son acts selfishly as the father responds selflessly.

The money is not cold in the youngest son's pocket when he hits the high road heading out of town. He goes to a far country, as far away from home as he can get, and then proceeds to lose all his money in a Las Vegas style of living - perhaps on cheap booze, women and gambling. Prodigal: Recklessly extravagant. Before long the young man finds himself on the streets, with no money to buy food and no shelter in which to spend the night. And when he has spent everything, famine drives him to job hunting. His friends seem to have disappeared when his money disappeared. At long last, this now-dissolute son of a wealthy man does secure a job - feeding pigs out in the field. In the Jewish culture, there was no job so personally, morally, socially, or religiously more degrading than feeding pigs. The Old Testament explicitly instructs, "Don't mix with pigs."

This is not the end of the matter. There is one step lower yet in which to sink. The young man becomes so hungry that he would like to eat what the pigs eat, but no one will give him even that. Finally, he recognizes that he has hit bottom. He is totally

on his own. He has nothing more to offer. He is not disaster in the making. He is disaster achieved. Even he sees that he has nothing, is nothing. The scene ends with the son of a wealthy man, a son who could be feasting at his father's table, is sitting among and eating with the pigs in a foreign land.

When he comes to himself, sitting there in the pigsty, he remembers, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger?" So, he rehearses a homecoming speech: "Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." No repentance here; just survival technique. The younger son is willing to live as a servant to have food in his belly and a roof over his head. So off he goes, towards home, to live off his brother's inheritance, having spent his own in loose living.

As the younger son approaches home the father sees him at a distance and, abandoning all decorum, runs out of the house and down the road to embrace him in open arms. Expressing his forgiveness, the father kisses the son publicly on the cheek. Prodigal: Spending lavishly; yielding abundantly. The younger son begins his prepared speech, "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you." But before he can ask to be hired as a servant the father interrupts him and receives him as his son, unconditionally. No dialogue about guilt or blame or regrets here. Let the homecoming party begin, shouts the father.

Put on the best robe, no throwaways from the Goodwill Thrift Store. Put a ring

on his finger. Put sandals on his feet. Full restoration status. Then kill the fatted calf. No heart-to-heart talk with the old man first. No extra chores demanded. No go-to-your-room-for-a-week-and-think-about-what-you've-done, no prohibiting of video games, just a clean robe for his back, and a fine ring for his hand, and a pair of new sandals for his feet. The father did not even wait for his elder son to get home from work before beginning the festivities. They celebrate as Jesus celebrated by eating with sinners and tax collectors. Full recovery. Lost is found. Dead is alive!

And then the elder brother comes in from the fields, hears the music and dancing and I am glad that I was not the one who had to tell him what it was all about. The elder brother sends a slave in to inquire about the festivities and confirm his suspicions. He would not come close to see for himself, lest he pick up the beat and begin tapping his foot to the beat of the music. The news of his brother's return and the father's response has made him angry; an understatement. For him, the good news was bad news.

I am an eldest child myself - how many eldest children do we have here this morning? We know what it is like to break parents in so that in their later years they can exercise their new and improved skills on younger brothers and sisters. We often have to take the rap for the little criminals when they mess up. How many of you eldest children have heard parents say, as they are reprimanding or punishing, "it's because you are the oldest and should have known better"? Older siblings frequently get the

raw end of the deal. My guess is that the elder brother was not incensed by his younger brother's return, or even by his father's forgiveness of him, but by the celebration. Let the penitent come home, by all means, but let him come home to penance, not a party. Where is the moral instruction in that kind of welcome? What about facing the consequences of your actions? What about reaping what you sow? What kind of world would this be if we all made a practice of rewarding sinners while the God-fearing folk are still out in the fields?

In an unprecedented move, the father goes out to the elder brother and pleads with him to come and join the celebration. No way. He reveals his distance from the father. He judges: "All these years I have been working like a slave for you. I have never disobeyed your command. And no payoff. You never gave me even a goat, much less a fatted calf to celebrate. His brother has become "this son of yours". God help the elder son. God help him and God help all of us who understand his rage, who have felt so excluded and whose hurt has run so deep that we have cut ourselves off from home in self-righteousness, from the very ones whose love and acceptance we so desperately need. "This son of yours", the elder brother says, excluding himself from the family - this son of yours who is no kin to me, nor am I kin to you if you are going to choose him over me.

Here is where the loving father earns his title. He does not take a swing at his first born, as some of us might have been tempted to do, nor even remind him to honor

his father. He knows that he has lost both of his sons. He has lost the younger one to a life of recklessness, but he has lost the older one to a more serious fate, to a life of angry self-righteousness that takes him so far away from his father that he might as well be feeding pigs in a far country. The elder son wants his father to love him as he deserves to be loved, because he has stayed put, and followed orders and done the right thing.

And his father does love him, but not for any of that, any more than he loves the younger brother for what he has done. He does not love either of his sons according to what they deserve. He just loves them, more because of whom he is than because of who they are, and the elder brother cannot stand it. He cannot stand a love that transcends right and wrong, a love that throws homecoming parties for prodigal sinners and expects the hard-working righteous to rejoice. He cannot stand it and so he stands outside - outside his father's house and outside his father's love - refusing his invitation to come inside.

The father has a glad and generous heart, never tiring of giving his love away. "Son," he says, reclaiming the boy, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." His love for one child does not preclude his love for the other. The younger one's self absorbed recklessness cannot deflect the father's love and generosity any more than the elder son's self absorbed righteousness. They are a family; they belong to one another, and a party for one is a party for all. "We had to celebrate and rejoice,"

the loving father says to his elder son, "because this brother of yours" not my son but your brother - "was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The story ends with the elder brother standing outside the house in the yard with his father, listening to the party going on inside. Jesus leaves it that way, I think, because it is up to each one of us to finish the story. It is up to each one of us to decide whether we will stand outside all alone being right, or give up our rights and go inside to take our place at a table full of reckless and righteous saints and scoundrels, brothers and sisters united only by our relationship to one loving father. Do we practice humility? Or do we practice and excel at the art of self-righteousness, pride, arrogance, believing that we are absolutely right? This story is about a loving father who refuses to give us the love we deserve but cannot be prevented from giving us the love we need.