

27 March 2022, The Fourth Sunday of Lent: Luke 15:11-32

...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 (v32).

So many things can, and have been said, about what is perhaps the best-known Parable. Although usually called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” it is better called, “The Parable of the Father’s Love.” Parables are stories, whose purpose is to dramatically illustrate something about God. While Jesus’ Parables often use human relationships, or more often the breakdown of human relationships to make the point, the point is not about human relationships, but God’s relationship to us, and ours to God. In this case, Jesus is teaching the way of God’s love. By wanting to love as God loves, we will become better parents, spouses, children, people; but we start, as Jesus did, with the nature of God.

Jesus really told two stories, and the deeper power of the first, comes from the second. We might call the second story, “The Parable of the Elder Brother’s Refusal to Love.” I believe the contrast between the father’s love and the elder brother’s angry refusal to love is the central point.

You have likely heard sermons on this parable in which the preacher says that you, like the younger brother, are loved by God: no matter what, God welcomes you. Like me, you might be able to accept this theoretically for others but can’t quite believe it for oneself. Some have a profound sense of unworthiness; we remember the rotten things we have done to others, and ourselves; we remember our awful thoughts; we see our failings, doubts, equivocations, and we wonder whether God, whom we know, knows us better than we know ourselves, could possibly love that. We might reach an uneasy compromise. Since we are supposed to believe that God is all loving—even us—hopefully God will let us squeeze in, maybe God will ignore our failings, maybe God will lower the bar so we can hobble over it. If God is willing to lower the bar, take circumstances into account, give us a passing grade we don’t deserve, is such a God worthy of our worship?

God neither loves us because we are worthy, nor does God ignore our unworthiness. God loves us because God loves us. God does not love us despite our sins; God loves the wounded, hurt, angry, contrary, double-hearted, fumbling, failing person that is you, that is me. This is where true faith begins: in wanting to be loved by the God who already loves you; wanting to be changed by such love. This is beautifully expressed in a poem by George Herbert, a 17th Century, English priest and poet:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
from my first entrance in,
drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
if I lacked anything.
“A guest”, I answered, “worthy to be here”;
Love said, “You shall be the guest”.
“I the unkind, the ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee.”

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
“Who made the eyes but I?”
“Truth Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame
go where it doth deserve”.
“And know you not” says Love, “who bore the blame?”
“My dear, then I will serve”.
“You must sit down”, says Love, “and taste my meat”.
So, I did sit and eat.

The more we accept God’s love, the more God’s love grows in us, the more we learn to love as God loves. The elder brother knew duty, he knew right and wrong, he knew justice, he certainly knew anger; but he didn’t know love. He did not want to know or share the father’s love. You need not be him.

Accept the love of God, because it is yours already—yours to have more and more, yours to have for your healing, for your continued growth in love. Ask God to teach and strengthen you to share God’s love. You, too, will be compelled to celebrate; joy born of love. Sullen, pouty-faced Christians are an oxymoron: The fruit of God’s love growing in us is joy lived in all our relationships and environments. We are God’s beloved, and we desire everyone to know the joy of being God’s beloved.

Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, and your faithfulness to the clouds. How priceless is your love, O God! Your people take refuge under the shadow of your wings (Psalm 36:5,7). Amen.