

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

March 14, 2010
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Joshua 5:9-12
 Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21
 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A loving father and his two lost sons

What if I told you that when you walked into church this morning, you were one sort of person, but that when you walk out at the end of the service, you will be someone new? That you will have changed in some fundamental way? That is the promise of the Gospel -- that in Christ we enter a process of transformation that quickly or slowly changes how we see ourselves and how we look at life and the world around us. St. Paul makes this crystal clear in today's epistle: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). As one writer puts it, "that's a description of earth-shaking change that goes right to the core of our being -- something so fundamental that it changes the axis of our entire bearing; which, according to news reports, is exactly what scientists have said occurred to our earth as a result of the recent ... earthquake [in Chile]. Apparently the earth's figure axis moved several inches, and as a result our days have been shortened by approximately 1.25 milliseconds."¹

In Lent we are given forty days in which to look closely at the axis of our lives, to notice where our thoughts, attitudes, and choices still revolve around our own small self and that ancient, anxious, defensive question, "What's in it for me?" and also to notice where we have begun to find a new axis in the love of God in Christ. Transformation is what we're up to in Lent -- inner transformation that de-centers and de-thrones our little ego and reconciles us to God and neighbor. As St. Paul cries out in today's epistle: "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5: 20).

I can think of no finer story about reconciliation with God and neighbor than the parable from Luke's Gospel that we just heard. It is often called the parable of the Prodigal Son, but of course that title is not quite accurate, since the parable is really about a loving father who has two sons. However you name it,

¹ Ronald H. Love, "Are we willing to throw a feast?", SermonSuite,
 <<http://www.sermonsuite.com/the-immediate-word.html>>
 <http://news.yahoo.com/s/space/20100302/sc_space/chileearthquakemayhaveshorteneddaysonearth>

some folks consider it the greatest short story in the world,² and it is certainly one of the best-known and best-loved parables that Jesus ever told. When I hear it, I can't help thinking of Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, so today I brought in a reproduction of a portion of that painting. The poster is a bit frayed around the edges, because in the course of leading retreats, my husband and I have carried it to different places, but you can still make out the basic scene: the father is a bearded, nearly blind old man in a red cloak who has placed his large hands on the shoulders of his returning son. The son -- half-barefoot, exhausted, his head shaven like that of a prisoner or a survivor of a concentration camp, robbed of his identity -- wears no cloak, only torn undergarments. He kneels before the father, and his cheek is nestled against the father's chest, as if he were listening to the heartbeat of God.

The original oil painting hangs in the Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, and it is much bigger than this poster. In fact, it is huge -- 8 feet high and 6 feet wide -- and it includes not only the scene that we see here, the embrace of the father and his wayward younger son; it also portrays the elder son and three other figures that stand at the side or in the shadows behind. It was probably one of Rembrandt's last works, painted when the artist was close to death.

If you want to meditate more deeply on both the parable and the painting, I suggest you read Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, which has inspired thousands of Christians and probably hundreds of sermons, including this one.³ For now, as we walk through this familiar story, I invite you to notice where you identify with the characters. I imagine Jesus lifting up this parable before us as if it were a mirror. If we can see ourselves in it, perhaps we can sense where God is inviting us to take the next step in our journey of transformation. Are we the younger son, who runs away from home and returns full of penitence and sorrow? Are we the elder son, angry, resentful, and holding back? Are we the father, who is filled with compassion, forgiveness, and a joy that know no bounds?

The story begins: "There was a man who had two sons" (Luke 15:11). For reasons we are not told, the younger son decides to go it alone. He's outta there, itching to leave, ready to hit the road and do things his own way. He asks his father not only for his portion of his inheritance, but also for the right to spend it. As Nouwen points out, in that culture it was normal for a father to sign over his possessions to his son, but ordinarily the father would live off the proceeds for the

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975, p. 204.

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Fathers, Brothers, and Sons*, NY: Doubleday, 1992.

rest of his life. For a son to ask to receive and spend his inheritance *now* was to ask for what he had no right to have until after his father's death. In effect the son was rejecting his father, blowing him off, even wishing him dead.⁴

The loving father lets him go freely, for love cannot be coerced. The younger son takes off, money in hand, to what the story calls "a distant country," and there he squanders it all in dissolute living, until he hits that rock bottom place of the soul. Lost, humiliated, almost starving, he wishes desperately that he could eat the very pods that he's feeding to the pigs.

It's a path that we've all taken and may still be taking today, the go-it-alone path, the I-don't-need-God path, the rebellious path of "self-will run riot," in which we do whatever we darn well please and never mind the consequences to ourselves or anyone else -- until we end up defeated and at the end of our rope. Have you ever been lost in that distant country? Are you wandering there still? Have you ever tasted that bitter sense of shame, isolation, and loneliness that the younger son knows so well, wallowing with the pigs?

Then comes a beautiful line, one of the story's turning points: "When he came to himself..." It is as if Jesus were saying that at the deepest level of our being, we are good and we belong to God; we are made in God's image. When we come to ourselves, when we are truly ourselves, we begin the journey home to God. Our basic nature, our truest nature, is found as we head toward God, our divine Father and Mother, the Source of life.

So the young man comes to himself, turns, and starts to travel home, but he doesn't really trust the father's love. He has a plan and he starts making speeches, rehearsing his lines, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of the hired hands." He is heading in the right direction, but he is still far away. He still doesn't grasp the nature of the father's love. Will the father be harsh with him? Will he make his son work hard as a hired hand to atone for what he has done, make him earn his salvation?

The father, who has evidently been waiting eagerly for his son's return, catches sight of him while he is "still far off" and, "filled with compassion," runs out to greet him. It is completely unexpected and undignified, this decisive moment when the old man hikes his robe above his shins and runs, breathing hard, sandals slapping and forehead perspiring, until he reaches his son and catches him up in his arms.

That moment of reunion is the one that Rembrandt portrays. It is a wordless moment, a moment of enormous stillness, in which the gentle arms of the father embrace the repentant son and draw him close. Can you imagine those kind hands on your shoulders? Can you imagine your face sheltered in the

⁴ Ibid., p. 32

shadow of that warm red cloak, resting against the father's loving heart? That experience of acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is what our souls long for so ardently. We may need to gaze at that scene for a long time so that we can really take it in.

The repentant son tries to launch into his long apology, but the father will have none of it. "Quick," he says to his slaves, "bring out a robe, a ring, a pair of sandals. Clothe my son in fresh garments and let's have a party, for," says the father, "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" It's all about joy -- the father's joy and the joy of the repentant son. Can you imagine the joy that God feels when you decide at last to come home?

But the story does not end here. There is someone else to consider: the elder son, who is out in the field. When he approaches the house, he hears music and dancing. Rather than being caught up at once in the merriment, he calls one of the slaves and demands an explanation. The poster I've brought in shows only part of Rembrandt's painting, but Rembrandt places the elder son at some distance to the right of the embracing father and younger son. Like his father, the elder son is also bearded and wearing a red cloak, but unlike his father, he is standing erect and aloof, with his hands closely tucked together rather than open in an embrace of welcome and blessing. He is glaring down at his father and brother, for, as the parable tells us, he is outraged by what he sees. He thinks he has been neglected, and his sense of justice has been affronted. Sure, let the sinful brother come back, but give him bread and water, not the fatted calf; give him sackcloth and ashes, not a new robe and a ring.

The elder brother refuses to go inside. The father comes out looking for him, and the elder son says, "Look, I've been slaving for years. I've been dutiful, I've done all the right things -- I've served on the Vestry, and tithed, and prayed the Daily Office. I've voted for the right candidates and lobbied for good causes -- heck, I even showed up for adult ed. classes and for every parish event! But here you are, welcoming back this wretched son of yours" -- and you can practically see him waving his hand in dismissal -- "and I don't see you killing the fatted calf for *me!*"

Do you sometimes hear that voice of anger and jealousy and resentment within yourself? The elder son has done everything, and more, that he was (quote/unquote) "supposed" to do, but he has only been doing it in order to earn merit and to follow the rules, not because he is abiding inwardly in the father's love. In his own way, he, too, is as lost as his younger brother, and he, too, has run away from home. He embodies that part of our selves that wants to trust in its own righteousness, in what we deserve and earn and produce on our own. As writer Cynthia Bourgeault explains, "The older brother with his indignant 'This isn't fair!' is a textbook example of the [ego-centered] operating system at work. Through him, Jesus is asking us to look closely at that part in each one of us that

insists on keeping score, that can't let go into the generosity and the blessedness." Bourgeault goes on: "The parable's concluding image -- of the older son standing alone outside, refusing to join the party because he feels he has been slighted -- is a vivid symbol of the way the [ego-based] operating system holds us back from joining the dance of Divine Mercy in full swing around us. If we're stuck in the ego, we can't hear the music."⁵

The parable makes it clear that the father loves both sons. He runs out to meet them both, and wants both of them to sit at his table and to share in his joy.⁶ "My son," says the father to the angry elder son -- and the Greek word, "teknon," is an affectionate word for child, or daughter, or son -- "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." Sweet words. "You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Come home," the father is saying. "I have always loved you, and my love for your brother in no way diminishes my love for you."

What will the elder brother do next? Will he stay outside, holding tight to his angry self-righteousness, or will he follow his brother's lead, accept his father's love, and join the celebration? Jesus told this story with the elder brother very much in mind, for the parable is his response to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes who complained that he welcomed sinners and ate with them. Would the Pharisees and scribes let go their ego-centered self-righteousness and join the feast? Would the elder brother? Will we?

That is the scandal of the father's love, and the scandal of the Eucharist, for everyone is welcome to the feast, prodigal and respectable alike, all of us equally dependent on and equally embraced by the unconditional love of God. It is a meal that can transform our consciousness and shift the axis of the self, so that we discover our center and true self in the unconditional love of God.

So, come to the table of Christ, as the old prayer says,⁷ "you who feel weak and unworthy, you who come often and you who have stayed away.

"Come, you who love him and you who wish you could.

"Come, you who are hungry for friendship or forgiveness.

"Come, you who long for meaning or a just world."

Come. The Father is waiting for you, arms outstretched.

⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, Boston: Shambhala, 2008, p. 49.

⁶ Nouwen, op. cit., p. 74.

⁷ Ray Simpson, *Healing the Land: Natural Seasons, Sacraments, and Special Services*, The Celtic Prayer Book, Volume 3, Suffolk, England: Kevin Mayhew, 2004, p.154, based on a prayer of the Iona Community.