

Rev. Lisa Schrott
3-27-22
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Healing Through Forgiveness

We are approaching our Lenten journey this year through the lens of healing, seeking to experience the pain of the cross and the joy the empty tomb with more wholeness in body, mind and spirit. As part of our healing cycle, we will consider what it means to live with a perspective of forgiveness. Hear now a story of God's relentless pursuit of us through the gifts of mercy and grace – the Parable of the Prodigal Son. While this parable may be familiar to many of you, listen to it with open ears and an open heart, as God's word to you on this Sunday morning. A reading from Luke chapter 15:

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: Then Jesus said, "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.’” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

The NY Times article this Wednesday opens with clothing...“After 25 years in prison, George DeJesus said the realization that he had been freed began to sink in only when he was finally able to change out of his prison uniform and put on his own clothes...‘When I took off them blues and started putting on these (referring to a sweatshirt), every stitch of clothing that I put on, my smile got bigger and bigger,” he said. “That was about the moment — when I put these clothes on, it was real for me.’ Mr. DeJesus was speaking on Tuesday after a judge freed him and his brother, Melvin DeJesus overturning their convictions in the 1995 murder of their neighbor.

Both brothers credited their mother, Elizabeth DeJesus, with helping them keep their fight to be exonerated alive, year after year and decade after decade. “It was hard because you could lose faith,” George DeJesus said at a news conference where the brothers embraced each other, their parents and other relatives. ‘But we always fought hard and, just when we felt that momentum going down, my mother made us promise we would never give up — no matter what happens.’ Ms. DeJesus put her arms around her sons and said: ‘...So I got my boys here and I have to thank God for it. We are blessed.’ ”¹

And 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. As I read the story about the DeJesus brothers – yes, their last name really is DeJesus – I couldn’t help think about our parable today. About that moment of celebration when the lost is found. About a parent who never gives up hope. About two brothers who embraced after being apart. And about how the parable of the prodigal son we hear in scripture doesn’t end that way.

Yes... this parable has a happy ending, with the father embracing the long lost son, forgiving him for his actions and celebrating his return. And yet, I have always longed to know

¹ Michael Levenson. Brothers, Wrongfully Convicted of Murder, Are Freed After 25 Years in Prison. *New York Times*. March 23, 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/23/us/michigan-brothers-exonerated-murder.html?referringSource=articleShare>

the next chapter. Does the younger brother return home for good? Or does he enjoy the party and food and the clothes, and when life gets tedious and boring and the farm work hard, does he leave again in search of the bright lights and big city? Do the brothers reconcile? Or does the older brother remain resentful and bitter over his father's embrace of his wayward brother?

The parable of the prodigal son is one in which we can see ourselves in the various roles at various times of our life. We may have had a "prodigal" phase where we squandered our money and time in dissolute living. We may have had a "prodigal" child or partner or friend whom we welcomed back with open arms after a painful absence. We have been the forgiven one, receiving underserved grace and mercy. And we have been the one who forgives, extending wide mercy, our heart full of love. And in the process of forgiving and being forgiven, we have been healed – we have been restored and have been made whole.

But what do we do with the older brother? If I'm honest, this is the character I often relate most closely with. The one who does the right thing – or at least tries to do the right thing. Productive and dutiful, trying to live up to the expectations of those around him.

When I was doing my chaplaincy internship at the VA Hospital in Atlanta, in one of my debriefing sessions, my chaplain supervisor shared with me that he noticed I used a lot of "should" language when I spoke. I "should" have been able to connect better with this family, I "should" have seen more patients today. I "should" finish all my charting before I go home, even if that means staying late. It was an epiphany moment for me. He was right – like the older son in the parable, I was focused on trying to do the right thing at the expense of the bigger picture. He reminded me that words matter – that my internal dialogue affected my outlook and perspective. And that by using the language of "should" I was putting the onus and responsibility on someone else. And that it can ultimately lead to resentment and bitterness and feelings of being put upon and injustice and anger at perceived mistreatment. Cue the older brother in the parable here. My chaplain supervisor challenged me to claim my actions – to express them as my wants and my needs and not the expectations of others. I wish I could say that that summer cured me of the "should-it is" disease. It didn't. I am very much a work in progress. So I appreciated the opportunity to spend time with the prodigal son and his older brother this week – reading and praying and listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit – and not answering every email I should respond to.

I see a lot of the older brother in reports I hear on the news or in social media. People upset that someone else received a benefit or a hand up when they didn't receive one. Or people happy with what they have until someone else gets what they have – someone who they don't think deserves it. I see a lot of the older brother in people I know. Good church-going people. Hard working people. People who do everything right – or try to. People who are never thrown a homecoming party, because they never left home. And yet they find themselves in a far country – far from themselves, far from community, far from God.

The Rev. Baron Mullis, a pastor in Philadelphia, shares this perspective on the older brother saying, “The older son has done everything right in his life. He stayed home and worked hard. The return of his younger brother from the far country and the joy of his father send him into an emotional crisis. ... In this moment, the joy drops out of the bottom of the story. The far country is a lonely place. You can do everything right and still wind up in the far country. You can play by all the rules and work hard and still wind up in the far country.

One day, your job’s gone. It’s cheaper overseas, and there you are, off in the far country. You can work so hard at marriage you don’t think you have anything else to give and, one day, your spouse says, “There’s nothing left,” and there you are: far country. Your children grow up and they don’t need you like they once did, and there you are: out in the far country. Everyone knows at some point in their life what it is to be underappreciated, to work, work, work and have someone else get the party. Everyone knows what it is to get hurt, and there you are: far country. It would be hopeless, the inevitability of the far country, if it weren’t for the relentlessness of grace.²

The relentlessness of grace is the face of Jesus. It is the heart of our parable this morning – It is the heart of forgiveness. It is the heart of healing. The relentlessness of grace is what the older brother struggles to accept. He struggles to accept that not only is father embracing his brother through relentless grace, but that he is also embraced by this relentless grace. And he needs to celebrate this embrace of grace – the gift of grace for himself and the gift of grace for others.

Like the father in this parable, Jesus is often criticized for welcoming sinners. Jesus invites us all to the celebration party. And we need to accept that invitation and stop resenting that others who we might not think are deserving also get an invitation to the party. Catholic priest and contemplative theologian Henri Nouwen speaks of this resentment in his book *Return of the Prodigal Son*. He wrote this book after being deeply affected – one may say obsessed with the Rembrandt painting of this name. After spending months studying it at The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia, he writes on each of the characters in turn. In speaking of the older brother, Nouwen reflects on his struggles with resentment, saying “My resentment is not something that can be easily distinguished and dealt with rationally. It is far more pernicious: something that has attached itself to the underside of my virtue. Isn’t it good to be obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, hardworking, and self-sacrificing? And still it seems that my resentments and complaints are mysteriously tied to such praiseworthy attitudes. ... And it seems that just as I want to be most selfless, I find myself obsessed about being loved. Just when I do my utmost to accomplish a task well, I find myself questioning why others do not give themselves as I do. Just when I think I am capable of overcoming my temptations, I feel

² Baron Mullis. *4th Sunday of Lent — March 27, 2022 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 Lent 4C Do you know where the “far country” is?* <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/03/4th-sunday-of-lent-march-27-2022/>

envy toward those who gave in to theirs. It seems that wherever my virtuous self is, there also is the resentful complainer.”³

Nouwen struggles to reconcile what his brain knows and what his heart feels when it comes to fairness. The older son resents all that isn't fair in the world, or at least isn't fair on the surface. The older son, like me too often, confuses mercy with fairness. As a commentator has noted, "...by definition, mercy isn't "fair." So far from keeping accounts, mercy sets accounts aside altogether, loving the debtor *despite* the debts. That's why we call it "mercy." Like love and joy, mercy lives and moves in a sphere above and beyond "fairness" — and divine love is, first and foremost, merciful love.”⁴

We receive healing when we understand and accept deep in our bones and with every breath we take that God's love and grace and mercy and forgiveness are not warranted. However, they are relentless. And as Nouwen concludes, "Unlike a fairy tale, the parable provides no happy ending. Instead, it leaves us face to face with one of life's hardest spiritual choices: to trust or not to trust in God's all-forgiving love." Friends, in a few weeks when we come to the cross, we will come face to face with God's all-forgiving love of each one of us. We will come face to face with Jesus – the one who redeems us through his death. And before we can celebrate at the party on Easter morning, we must each answer the question that Nouwen poses: do we trust in God's all-forgiving love? Join me in prayer.

³ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. New York: Doubleday Books. 1992. p71.

⁴ The Salt Project. *Lost and Found: Salt's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 4*

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/26/lost-and-found-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-4>