

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Date: Sunday March 14, 2010
Title: “Why Can’t We Be More Like Dad?”
Theme: What keeps the church from emulating the father in the story of ‘the prodigal son?’

The story of the prodigal we, unfortunately, know all too well
Of course, if we’ve spent any time in church we’ve heard this story – it’s perhaps the best-loved and most important parable Jesus tells
Unfortunately, we also know the story from experience
We’ve been the ones who have wandered away from God and family
If not us, we’ve seen it, time and time again
Young people we know who get into drugs or alcohol
Some families have prayed for years that a son or daughter would, like the scripture says, “come to himself” or “come to herself”

The church is full of people who have lived this story in different ways
I wonder, then, why we as a church haven’t taken to heart one of its most important lessons?

We call this story ‘the prodigal son,’ or ‘the lost son’ – but for the church, it’s vital that we shift the focus – I’ve also seen it called, simply, ‘the forgiving father’

What you call it makes a difference – and for the church as a body, for us in our life together – it’s the father’s love that makes the difference
What I want to know today is: “Why can’t the church be more like dear old Dad?”

Picture him: watching, waiting day after day, hoping against hope that his son would come home

How else could he have seen him coming “while he was still a long way off?”

And then when he does see him, what does he do?

He hikes up his tunic and he starts running

We don’t realize how out-of-character this is in that part of the world, in the time when Jesus told his story – the idea that the head of the family would come running to welcome his good-for-nothing son like this

And then how he embraces his son, literally ‘falling on his neck’ and kissing him

It all seems kind of desperate, doesn’t it? Isn’t ‘tough love’ our goal?

Not for the father, apparently
He's just happy to have his son back
So happy that he throws a party
Champagne corks are popping
The kitchen is hopping
The boy gets cleaned up and dressed up
Everyone gets out their dancing shoes

The words you expect – the harsh words, the shame, the criticism – are
nowhere to be found
The welcome is pure – pure love, pure delight
There will be time to dissect what went wrong later
For now, there is only joy

Why can't the church be more like dear old Dad?

Listen to the passion there – being totally given over to what's required in
that moment
The joy, the celebration, the welcome that goes beyond formalities and
goes directly to the heart
There are no words there: "Son, where you been?"
There is only an embrace, a kiss, tears of absolute joy

Where are those things in us?
Where is our passion for those on the outside of faith?

It strikes me that when I look at the Jesus I see in the gospels, he is first
and foremost a Savior for those who are on the outside
The first verse of this passage we read: "Now all the tax collectors and
sinners were coming near to listen to him."
The story itself is told in order to silence the self-righteous who thought
"those people" had no place in God's plan
Everywhere we look, Christ's greatest love is toward the screw-up
And his deepest condemnation is toward those who think they have it
together

This is the heart of the gospel – you are welcomed. You are loved. You
are accepted. Change comes, holy living comes, but it comes later.
First we must celebrate. Now there are those who don't get this, like the
elder brother.

“I don’t understand. This son of yours who has wasted your money on prostitutes comes home and you want to throw a party?”
But the father is gentle, even with his stubborn child who won’t join the party: “Don’t you see? We have to celebrate. Your brother was dead. And he’s alive again. He was lost, and now he’s found.”

This is the father’s heart – his passion
There is time to offer correction later
First, let’s show him some love
Oh, some will complain – some will complain that the father is as careless with his love as his son was with his money
I’ve even heard this story called ‘the parable of the prodigal father’ – prodigal being another word for wasteful, extravagant

But I, for one, don’t care
I dream of a church that really takes this story to heart
I dream of a church where the tax collectors and sinners flock to hear what Jesus has to say
That loves every person who walks through its door
No matter what they look like
And not just in a superficial way, but in an extravagant way
And especially extravagant the more different someone is
The quality of the love we show has to be in direct proportion to how much of an outsider someone seems
This is the joy, this is the celebration

There are concrete things, of course, we can do – small things
We need to fix our visitor’s parking signs out here that the snow has broken down – and we need to respect them – because we need to expect that people will come
We can decide we’re going to leave space on the end of the pew for the newcomer who arrives late
Again, we need to expect that people will come
Just like the father sees his son coming from a long way off

We have to be serious not just about being friendly, but about being loving
Saying hi is one thing
But we should have a physical aversion to seeing anyone standing by themselves while we chat with our friends
It’s just not acceptable, because it doesn’t reflect the heart of God

The heart of God rejoices that those on the outside have come near
This can't just be my task, or Sharon's task – if you are a Christian, your job
is to love

Maybe the problem is we don't remember how hard it is to come back –
maybe it's been too long for you

But look at the prodigal – he rehearses his speech – “I've sinned against
heaven and against you. I'm not worthy to be called your son. Treat
me as one of your hired hands.”

To come back to God is to swallow your pride – it's something that people
don't do lightly

And I believe everyone has a reason for walking in that door

It's not just chance – it's a God-thing

Are we going to celebrate with them or not?

I read a comment recently in a United Methodist magazine – it was a
conversation someone had with a young adult.

“Why would I go to church?” she said. “It's like going to someone else's
family reunion.”

“No one knows my name. They don't know my story, and I don't know
theirs. They smile as they welcome me, but their eyes look through
me toward someone they already know. It's just intimidating...”¹

Doesn't that make your heart hurt, to hear that? And this young woman
speaks for millions.

If that doesn't bother you, then I think you need to study the gospels again,
so that catch a glimpse of the Savior who went out of his way to love
the tax collectors, to love the sinners.

What would happen if the church – our church and every church – really
took this story – the story of the prodigal and his father – to heart?

What would happen if we began acting more like the father and less like
the older son?

Because that's really our choice.

It's the choice that the older son has at the end.

It's the part that Jesus doesn't tell us.

He doesn't tell us whether the older son joins the party or not.

That's up to us.

We can hold on to our perception that the church is for the righteous.
That's it's for the good people. That it's for folks who know how sit
still and keep quiet and sing hymns in four-part harmony.

Or we can really embrace the gospel.
The gospel as it was proclaimed by a preacher from Galilee whom the tax
collectors and sinners couldn't get enough of.
The choice is ours today.
The father invites us to the party
It's a celebration born out of the passion the father has to see his son come
home

The question for us is, will we go inside?
Will we celebrate this great love God has for all people – will we do our part
to keep the party going?
Because that's the heart of the gospel
It's the same heart that's in the father – the prodigal, wasteful father whose
heart bleeds for his lost child

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¹ Karen Greenwaldt, General Secretary of the General Board of Discipleship, writing in the Jan/Feb/Mar 2010
edition of *Circuit Rider* magazine: <http://www.umph.com/pdfs/circuitrider/U301WSTC.pdf>.