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Interim Pastor  
Lent

March 6, 2016  
Fourth Sunday of

Sacrament of Communion

“Two Children—One Parent”

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 9-22b

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable:

“There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup> “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord God, that your light and your love might flood our being as I speak this day—indeed, may what we say and do continue to give you glory, through Christ, Our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Here is a story about recognition—and non-recognition. And here is a story about three people—a parent—and his two children.

The younger son does not recognize the destructive folly of his choice—at least at first. He goes off and does what he wants. However, he comes to recognize that his situation is utterly abhorant to him. It comes when he hits rock bottom. It comes when even the food he is feeding the pigs looks attractive to him, but—of course—he is not even given this wretched fodder to fill his stomach. Now, perhaps he did not need to go away from his home to come to this moment in time, but it has come. And it is in this same moment—wherever it occurs—that this individual also sees that there is a better place for him.....

It is not hard, I’d wager, for us to insert ourselves into this narrative, for all of us—I am quite sure—have experienced moments when we cannot run anymore. Moments when—no matter the particulars—we can no longer deny that things must change, if life is to go on. For this younger son, there is a better place for him, and he sees it clearly now: He will return to his father’s house. But there is another recognition that

goes with this same realization: The younger son believes that his return to this place, requires him to adopt the position of a hired hand, a step-down from being the son, of this same father. Here is the other recognition that the younger son takes with him, as he sets out for home.

And now—as Jesus tells us—the narrative centers on the father. He has been absent from this story for nearly a dozen verses—but, now, he takes center stage.

What can we say about him?

The figure of the father—not mention the figures of the two sons—has been the subject of countless studies, essays—even works of art. And on the your bulletin cover, today, is a detail of a painting by Rembrandt, illustrating the moment soon to occur—the re-union of the father and the younger son, but I’d invite us to have a look at the face—indeed, the eyes—of the father, and let me suggest that we see not only an elderly man here, but also a man whose eyes are closed in prayer—whose eyes—most likely—are filled with tears...of joy!

He is alive! The son who had run away—the son who had failed to stay in touch—the son who was thought to be dead (and for good reason because the world can be a cruel and dangerous place)—his son is yet among the living! Air fills his lungs! The embrace we see illustrated here is a celebration that there is life—and that life is all that matters in this moment—and here it is captured so intimately—even tenderly--by Rembrandt...

What does the father see? He sees a homecoming—nothing more--and nothing less! And this—THIS—is what brings him joy! His joy does not spring from the fact that the younger son has “come to his senses.” (quote, unquote). No, it springs from seeing him again. He could have waited for the son to come to him—he could have. He could even asked him to first explain himself—but he does not! No, he runs to him with a joy springing from un-questioning...in-exhausted.... love.....

Last week, I asked what kind of table God sets for us, using the imagery presented in the book *“Babette’s Feast”*. I asked if you and I see this table—and to see this table, I suggested, as representing the nature of God—as a table that is either filled to overflowing with every good thing—or as something very different. And what kind of table does the younger son expect to see? Well, he expects to see a table that will only be set for him after he has confessed and made penance—and a table—moreover--that will then be set with only the most basic of food—the fare served to

hired hands.... He does not expect that his encounter with his father—his coming to his father's table—to be an occasion where he will meet unmerited grace--extravagant generosity.

If we have run away, know this: The table God sets for us today—here before us--is the one where we will receive unquestioning love—and unmerited grace—infinite mercy—and it will be this way, my dear friends, *because it is where we meet the God who has given us all that God has: His Son, His only Son, as the Sacrifice for our sin—for our estrangement from Him....*

This encounter—Rembrandt shows us.  
This re-union.

It warms our soul.  
Perhaps even shed a tear....

But we need to remember that what the father does here—by running to his son—by placing a robe on him, rings on his fingers—and, above all, by killing the fatted calf--are scandalous acts—that they are acts just as un-nerving—and un-heard of--as the act that set this whole story in motion: The father's division of his property with his sons while he is still living.

Yes, the particulars of this encounter—this re-union—fly in the face of what is expected, and what is respectable. In First Century Jewish society, it would be a sibling—the older brother, in this case—who would have gone out to meet the younger son when the latter arrived, and it would have fallen upon the older brother to hear his brother's confession and to then decide to make amends, or not, given the hurt—the shame—that had been inflicted upon the family by what had transpired. But—thank goodness!—that this is not what happens! For the younger son. For you. For me.... You know, as I look at the face of the father, as shown by Rembrandt, I am struck by the fact that the father is choosing to ignore everything around him—that he is concentrating all his attention—all his love—all that he is, upon the son, now on bending knee. Does he know how others will look upon what he is doing? Of course he does. But it does not matter at this moment. Here...is what matters. The embrace that is shared. Once he was lost—but, now, he is found....

And as we look at this detail from Rembrandt's painting, let our eye now wander over to the figure on the right---the figure of the older brother....

He is—as he himself says most forcefully—the dutiful one. He is the “good” child who has stayed home, who has never disobeyed—who has never asked for anything special. And we have to respect him for this. He was maintained—to the letter, at least--the Fourth Commandment. He has never disobeyed his father. He is, perhaps, like the older child in most families—the one who innately feels that much is expected of them, and who then rises to the challenge of doing well—of succeeding in life--to leading the way, being the role model. And—by all accounts—we led to believe that this older son is respected by all around him. And I think--without doubt—that his father also realizes this....

How, then, to handle this...situation? How do we respond to someone who has been dutiful—who has never asked for a reward—and who is now resentful--even self-righteous--as a result?

Two options come to mind:

1.) The father could have agreed with the older son’s assessment. He could have seen that his lavish treatment of his returning, younger brother, is quite unfair—that it disrespects the loyalty that the older son has demonstrated, year after year. More to the point, he could also have given the older son a fatted calf, so he could finally celebrate with his friends.....

2.) The father could have scolded his older son for his selfishness, ordered him to get “over himself”—to get over his legalistic way of looking at the world. It would have been totally within his means to do this—in fact, it would even be expected of him, being a father figure, for a good parent should correct their child....

He does neither. He kills but one fatted calf. He proceeds to throw a party for the younger son and just when convention would say that the father should stay in the banquet hall—he chooses to leave the hall. Why? Because his older son is not inside it. Yes, we would do well to remember that custom dictated that the older son would offer a toast on this occasion—would act as an emcee, so to speak, for this event. But he is not there—and so, the father comes to where his older son is hurting—and in pain....

A time to tell him to “get over it”? No. Rather, it is a time—as Scripture tells us—when the father pleads with him---tries to persuade him—tries to teach him that there is another way to see what is going on.....

What is going on?

Well, a feast has been prepared—a great meal has been served, but—you know—the older son does not see it as a meal thrown in his honor, too—he doesn't. He doesn't see that he is “lost”—too....

Perhaps we saw that coming—but maybe we didn't. But the father—and the father, for all his aged eyes--has the wisdom to see that this is, indeed, the case....

We are given clues to this. To me, one that stands out comes when the older brother uses the term “this son of yours”—all to speak of the one who has returned. What is he saying? To him -to the older son--there is no longer a younger brother in his midst, given what has transpired—there is only an individual who has returned to home and who—against all custom—is being treated as if he were still a son to this old man. This is what is going on here, to the older son. And so, he will have no part in it. This is why he is outside the banquet hall....

And how does the father respond to this? With a plea to come inside the hall—and let me suggest that coming into the banquet hall will allow the older son to see just how lost he is—not just when it comes to his brother—and to his father: But also when it comes to himself....

“All have fallen short of the glory of God.” Paul's words—as recorded in Romans. As I say them again I am reminded that Paul makes this pronouncement after he has reminded the Christian congregation in Rome—comprised of both former Gentiles--and also Jews—that not a single one of them has been able to fully keep the Law of Moses. Now, when it comes to the those believers who were once gentiles—or pagans—this is easy to grasp: None of them, as it were, even knew about the Law of Moses. But the same could not be said of those Jews who had converted—no, they were steeped in it. They were the kind of believers with much in common with the older son, here: They were dutiful—honest—God-fearing—but the fact remained that not one of them—not a single one of them—had fully kept the Law of Moses, either in deed, word—or thought....and, on this last point, there can be no doubt that the older son is filled with resentment—has even now, in this moment, dis-honored his father....

It is hard—yes, painfully hard especially when life has not treated us fairly—to remain beyond the clutches of resentment—anger—envy—thoughts—even acts—of violence.... This is sin, plain and simple. The older son is filled with it. I'd even wager that he even knows that this state of mind of his is not the place where God—much less his own father—wishes him to be...

What must he do?

He needs to go into the banquet hall—yes, there is a better place for him to be, and this is that place...

And if he goes into that hall—if he chooses to do this, (for remember the father chooses only to plead with him to do so), here is what he will find:

He will see his brother---and he be brought to the realization of his solidarity, with him. He will. He will see—as it were—that he also needs to go to his father, and to say “father, I have sinned against heaven—and against you by what I have done—in thought, in word—in deed.” And when that happens, he will come “to himself”—he will come “to his senses”—without ever leaving home...

You know, sometimes the things we do—or don’t do—as Presbyterians can cause some people to shake their heads. As a Presbyterian pastor, for instance, I am not allowed to perform baptisms in private settings but only in services of worship, and when it comes to celebrating the Lord’s Supper, I am instructed to take an Elder of this congregation with me to share the bread and fruit of the vine. And why? In both cases, our Presbyterian way of doing things says that our faith in God is lived out in community—when we come together as a congregation: The elder who accompanies me to celebrate the Lord’s Supper does so as your representative, friends—they bring, with them, the love and the greetings of this church family to other members of Trinity who cannot be with us, today. Yes, as Presbyterians, we believe that being in community—in the ways I’ve described—is a way for us to be reminded of our solidarity, one with another—to be reminded that all of us stand in need of God’s grace—and mercy....

And so, today, the father pleads with the older brother to go into the banquet hall—*for here is how he will realize that he is truly kin to his sibling—that they, alike, stand in need of their father’s mercy....*

And, oh, what a table! What a table is spread—for them both! Yes, perhaps for the first time—to borrow a page from last week’s sermon—the older brother will have an epiphany—he will realize that everything his father has is truly, his as well. He will see that the table is, truly, filled to overflowing—not just for his sibling—but also for him, too....

Here is the Lord's Table. Here, as our Lord Jesus tells me , is a foretaste of the banquet, one day, to be tasted by all the faithful in Heaven—and it is a meal—as Scripture tells us--where people from east—west—north—and south—come, together, to share.

That's you—and that's me.

It is younger brothers—and older brothers

It is sisters of all ages.

People of all races.

It is the human family.

*It is God's will—no matter who we are—what we have done—or what we have left undone—that ALL of us come together, and here's the best part of it: **The food will never run out.***

***For God's mercy is infinite....***

Thanks be to God!

Amen.