

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, C
Joshua 5:9-12
Lutheran
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Portland, Oregon
March 14, 2010

Today's Bible story is a classic, for good reason. It's the kind of story that tells us the truth about ourselves and about God. A story about families, how siblings compete for their parents' love, how resentments build, how reckless behavior tests our unity. How one parent's love was wide enough to embrace both his sons at different extremes of fortune, drawing one home from a dangerous place, drawing the other out from under stifling layers of bitterness.

First there was the one I call the Reckless Son. Other people call him "prodigal" meaning extravagant or wasteful. He's the one who usually gets the most attention, and that's typical. He enjoys occupying center stage. He plays his life like a melodrama, and the action is always centered on his interests, his needs. When he's happy, he expects everyone to laugh with him. When he's down, everyone has to feel sorry for him. And when the Reckless Son makes mistakes, he makes big mistakes. But in our story he also enjoys big rewards-- a big homecoming, a big embrace, an enormous party.

A lot of people could have seen it coming, that this guy who lives so big was in for a big fall one day. The mystery is why the father didn't see it before he turned that inheritance over to him. Or maybe he did see it, somehow, and out of love he took risk.

Before we dismiss this younger son, let's acknowledge that he is not all that different from any of us. What he wanted was independence. He wanted to follow his own dreams and be his own boss instead of taking orders from dad and big brother. He wanted to move out to the Pacific Northwest and reinvent himself. Escape the weight of traditions and expectations, even escape the weight of his father's love, because that love weighed heavy on him in its own way.

This younger son gives us a picture of how we human beings often treat the inheritance God has given us. "We take what God has given us -- the money, the brains, the personality, the health, the resources. We take the inheritance God has given us. And then we say, 'God, I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore. I'm going to go and live my life as if you never existed.'" (Marquart, see below) I'm going to live for myself and live my way, serving my needs and my interests. That's what it is to be reckless. We all do this, and it is indeed reckless.

On the other hand we have the older son, the Dutiful Son. He's obedient, responsible, anything but reckless. Walks the straight and narrow. Watches his language. Does the right thing. While the Reckless Son is off spending the family fortune, the Dutiful Son holds down the farm.

As somebody observed, "There are those who come to a party, and there are those who work to prepare for that party... There are those who go home from the party singing their happy songs, and there are those... who clean up after them, who sweep the cracker crumbs and bits of smoked fish from the floor and wipe the white circles left by the mugs on polished wood." (John Vannorsdall, *Dimly Burning Wicks*, 1982, p. 46) That's the older son. Maybe it's you or me. Doing what needs to be done. Day in, day out.

It's not entirely by choice that the Dutiful Son plays the good boy. He feels he has to. You see, this older son is very concerned with proving himself. Everything he does is calculated to win his father's approval. Most of all, this older son tries very hard *never to make a mistake*. He's fearful of what would happen. Deep down, he is desperately afraid of losing his father's love.

The dark side of being so responsible is that this Dutiful Son is angry and resentful inside. That can happen to us too. He's tired of being good, tired of playing by the rules and going the extra mile, and he has come to resent his younger brother for opting out. Not only his brother, but every person who doesn't measure up to his own high standards. There are all kinds of people, he begins to notice, who are just not trying hard enough, not pulling their own weight. So where he used to be a compassionate man, now he's gone bitter and sour.

Everything erupts at the homecoming. Dutiful Son is outraged by that bear-hug welcome that warms our hearts. He's devoted a lifetime to earning his father's love, and his worthless brother gets that love for free!

Which is just the point. Because this father, the father of both these very different sons, operates by different rules. He doesn't ignore the good his older son has done all these years. And he doesn't ignore the damage his younger son has done. A big chunk of his life savings has been wasted. It's not that he doesn't care about the money. It's just that he cares so much more about the son. He cares so much more about having his family made whole again.

This father loves both his sons, infinitely. And see how he reaches out to both of them. He runs to greet the wayward one, embraces him, welcomes him home. And then he goes out personally to plead with the angry one, sulking in the barn. Because as Jesus tells the story of our lives, there is always enough of the heavenly parent's love to go around to all of us children, in all our different life situations. Not one of us is left out of our heavenly parent's love, not even you, not even me.

I wish I knew how the story ended. Did the Dutiful Son ever come to his senses, the way the Reckless Son did? Was he able to shake off his bitterness and receive the infinite love that was offered him? The kind of love that doesn't count the cost, love that opens its arms to welcome us home, no matter what has distanced us.

God's love, the heavenly parent's love, is for all of us, because all of us have wandered far. Our choices and behavior have caused damage. We've wasted the gifts God has given us, thrown them away with never a thought to how richly we were blessed. Other times we have hoarded God's gifts, played it safe, kept them to ourselves. We've let life's disappointments and burdens harden our hearts and eat away at our compassion. So many ways we can go wrong, and one wonderful way that God sets us right.

From all our selfish, wandering ways, God calls us to our senses, to receive the welcome that is meant for all of us, through the gift of Jesus Christ.

There's an old story about this welcoming love. It may sound familiar to you. As the story is told,

The young son had gone to San Francisco. He was out of money, out of friends, out of options. He had hit the bottom and was at wits' end. This lost son wrote a letter home to his parents living in the Portland area. He wrote,

“Dear Mom and Dad, I have sinned deeply against you. I have sinned against you and I have sinned against God and I am not worthy to be called your son. There is no reason for you to love me or welcome me back home. But now I'm at the bottom of the barrel and I need to come back home. I hope that you would welcome me. I have been given a ticket for a train, a ticket to get me back to Portland. The train comes past our farm south of Portland. The train comes around the bend and right past our farmhouse. If you want me to come home, please put a white towel on the clothesline, out in the back yard near the tracks. I will then know that you want me to come back home. If there is no towel there, I understand. I'll understand that it is not right for me to come back home.”

The young man sent the letter, got on the train, and started heading north. As he came closer and closer to home, he became more nervous inside and was pacing up and down the center aisle of the train. As the train came closer and closer to his farmhouse, he couldn't bear it anymore. He sat down next to a man and said, “Sir, around this next corner, this next bend, there is going to be a farm house on the right. A white house. An old red barn behind it. A broken-down fence. There will be a clothesline in the back yard. Would

you do me a favor and look and see if there is a white towel hanging on the clothesline? I know it sounds peculiar, but I can't bear to look."

Well, the train came closer and closer to the bend and started to go around the bend, and the young man's heart was racing as fast as it could. The man said, "Look, look, look! Open your eyes."

The whole clothesline was covered with white towels. The oak trees were covered with white sheets. The barn roof was covered with sheets. The old broken-down fence was covered with white sheets. There were sheets everywhere. The father and mother so deeply wanted their son to come back home. (adapted from Edward F. Marquart, *The Prodigal Son*, www.sermonsfromseattle.com)

We somehow knew how the old story would end. Because it's exactly the way the story always ends. For all of us. In God's welcome. Amen.