

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral Sermon
March 14, 2010 - The Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Nathan LeRud

Last night, this cathedral was full of people...all kinds of people: Trinity parishioners, Episcopalians from other churches, Roman Catholics, Mennonites, Presbyterians, Evangelicals of varying stripes, people with no church affiliation at all...people who haven't set foot inside a church in years! We were a cathedral full of prodigal sons last night, coming together to give voice to that need that we have, to be welcomed back home...to give voice to that need. And we had some great music, to help us give voice to that need, that desire, and God's promise that we can come home again.

The music was Bruce Springsteen's, but the theology was not that far off from Frederick William Faber's (1814-1863) hymn that we just sang. "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea. There's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty." The prodigal was welcomed home last night. He found a home here in this cathedral, which is as it should be, I think. So that's one side of this parable that we need to hear. Sometimes that's the story that we need, right?...the homecoming story, the assurance that no matter what happens, no matter what we do, no matter who we become..."there is a wideness to God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea." You can come home again. That's an important story for the church to tell.

But there is another story at work here also. And it's maybe a harder parable for us to hear. It's the parable of the older brother. And it's a parable about our actual families...the ones that we actually have here on earth, where forgiveness is not always unconditional. And estrangement does happen. It's a parable about what home actually looks like, when we get back there...which may not be the idealized way in which we remember it. It's the parable of the dysfunctional family, which is to say it's about a real family...the family that most of us know, or can identify with. It's about our families. And that means it's also a parable about the church. That great dysfunctional family...God love us.

It's a parable that Jesus tells to the Pharisees, and the religious leaders who are saying "snarky" things about the men and women, with whom Jesus is keeping company...the men and women of "dubious reputation" who are hanging around him...the prodigal sons and daughters, whom Jesus counts among his closest friends. Jesus doesn't tell the parable for the younger brothers, and the younger sisters--although they're there. They're present, to overhear it. But the parable is aimed at the religious types - the ones who hang out in church. The elder brothers and sisters - the responsible ones, who have done all the right things...who have made successes of the lives...who are giving and gracious, and try to do the right thing. The people who live ethically and responsibly. The people who vote, right? The people who pay their taxes. The ones who make an effort to subscribe to publications, with which they don't agree - just to broaden their view. (laughter) The ones who have been brought up well...the ones who know which fork to use at dinner...and aren't snobbish about it! The good guys - the salt of the earth! The ones who will inherit the earth...the responsible people...the ones who sign up to do stuff...the people who volunteer to help out in the Food

Pantry, and spearhead the parish potluck. The good church people! You and I! We're the older brothers and sisters of the world. And we're NOT bad people! I think it's too easy...I think the church has spent too long, painting this parable as a black-and-white story about the good brother and the bad brother...the black sheep with the heart of gold...and the Pharisee who turns up his nose and judges. But that's not fair to Pharisees! They're not bad people! They do the right thing...they're trying to live a responsible life. They're working really hard, to be good people, in a world that does not reward good people.

Those of you who are older siblings might recognize this dynamic, right? I'm one. Aunt Betty is one (my mom's older sister, who is here this morning). I know being the older sibling was not easy for her, because I've heard the stories. We have different pressures put on us...we eldest sons and daughters. Being the older and the wiser one, theoretically, comes with a lot of baggage. We have a lot riding on our shoulders. We grow up faster. We see the way the world works. It's not pretty. Our default mode is to be the protector, the responsible one...the surrogate parent. Our younger siblings don't really get that...because there's a way in which they don't have to get it. That's the freedom of being a younger sibling. And so, the lot of the eldest sibling...we are chronically misunderstood. And I think the older brother, in this story, is a great case in point.

We can get so blind-sided by this important message of acceptance, and belonging...and miss the fact that this parable is not a nice story for everybody. There's no happy family reunion at the end. The older brother doesn't say, "You're right, Dad. I should be more loving," and throw his arm around his younger brother's neck, in time for the closing credits, right? There is no reconciliation here. What there is, is a pretty major bone of contention...certainly between the two brothers, but just as significantly, I think...between the father and the older brother. In welcoming the one son, the father effectively rejects the other, even as he tries to backpaddle with this off-the-cuff validation: "You know I love you. Everything I have is yours. But let's get back to this party that I'm throwing, for the son that I really love." (laughter)

Now maybe that's unfair to the father. I'm speaking as an oldest son here. (laughter) I don't think that overstates the case, though, for the older son...which is that he's right! His is actually a crucial voice to have in this parable, because it's not just about unconditional acceptance then. It becomes a story about what the cost of mercy really looks like. And it highlights, in a pretty devastating way, something that we know to be true...about the dynamic of forgiveness. Which is that mercy is not the same thing as justice. Love isn't fair. There's a wideness of God's mercy...that's true...that's one side of it. That title got misprinted in your bulletin in the first draft this week, and we caught the typo. I'm a little sad...it originally said "Hymn 470. There's a "wilderness" in God's mercy." (laughter) And I kinda' wish we hadn't caught it! There's a wilderness in God's mercy, and that's true! Right? God's mercy...God's forgiveness...is not this demure, toothless thing...like as baby kitten that crawls up into your lap, and makes you love it, in spite of yourself! There actually is a wilderness to God's mercy. It's thorny...and it's complicated, and it leaves a heckuva lot more questions unanswered, than it answers. And it does not necessarily lead to happy families. Unconditional forgiveness creates a lot more conflict than it resolves. So that's the scary truth, about families. They are not

fair places...love is not a cure-all. And following the path of The Saviour, means finding yourself in situations where there are no easy answers. And people are going to get hurt. That's true of most families I know. That's true of most churches that I know.

So the older son is right, and I don't think it's heretical to say that. He's right. This parable is fundamentally unfair. Maybe to both sons...I don't know that unconditional acceptance is really what the younger son really needs. I think a good kick in the pants might be just as effective. The older son has the right answer. And you have to admire his integrity...his inexorable integrity...his refusal to back down and compromise his ideals. He is not wrong, and the degree to which he is the voice of reason in this parable, sends a chill up my spine. So I have a lot of sympathy for that older son. And in a weird way, I think that Jesus does too...which is to say that, as easy as it is to paint the Pharisees and the scribes as these consummate bad guys, these mustache-twirling villains who hound Jesus, even unto death. As easy as that is, it misses an important piece of this parable...which is that Jesus loves those guys. And the father does too, in the parable. The father's response to his angry son: "You know that I love you. Everything that I have is yours."

That's kind of devastating in a way...because there is one thing that this older son cannot abide in this parable. And it's a love that is so powerful, that it transgresses the boundaries of what we know to be right...what we know of justice. The father's love is way past the boundaries of right and wrong here. We've got a father with such an intense longing to have his kid back, that he'll make a complete fool of himself. Running down the road, embracing his youngest before the words of explanation and apology are even out of his mouth. And the older son doesn't get that. That's a love he is not able to understand. It shakes him to his core. Makes him furious. Makes him livid. This is a parable that ends on a pretty unsettling note, with the son who is unwilling, or unable, to come to terms with the magnitude of his father's love. There's a block there.

And I wonder what that block is all about. And at the risk of getting overly-psychological about this parable, I wonder if what threatens the older son...is the implication that if his father has such an amazing boundary-breaking love for this youngest ne'er-do-well son...it means that the father has, as equally as strong a love for him, the oldest son, too. A love that has nothing...absolutely nothing to do...with the fact that he is right! Has nothing to do with his commitment to working hard, and making the farm work. This is a love that has nothing to do with his father's approval. I don't know very much about this father, but my sense is that the oldest son in this parable, has spent his whole life seeking his father's approval. And his younger brother comes shuffling on down the road. His father goes running off to meet him. And this oldest son's whole life...his whole self-understanding...his self-worth...his identity..., everything that he thinks he knows about himself, and his role in his family...it all comes crashing down around his ears. This is the moment when he realizes that his whole life is a sham. He's never going to get his father's approval. Because it was never about approval in the first place. It's a pretty devastating moment...the realization that your whole life, is built on some kind of lie that you've told yourself to make yourself feel better. I think that's the realization that this older son comes to...that his father will never approve of him. Because his father loves him too much.

Unconditional love can be a pretty threatening thing...because there are no conditions...which means that it is totally out of our control. It's ours to accept, or reject. And our need for control is such that...accepting the kind of "wilderness love" that the father offers his sons in this parable...that kind of wild, untamed, unboundaried, fundamentally-unsafe love...that's hard! You could spend a whole lifetime, trying to come to terms with that kind of love. It flies in the face of everything that we think we know about the way that the world works. But there it is.

The crazy thing about that kind of love, is that in order to really be able to experience and accept it, we have to come to that earth-shaking, rock-bottom place...where everything that we thought we knew about the way the world works...turns out to be a sham. Which is to say that we have to come to a place of death. That's where the prodigal comes...when he's sitting there longing for the corncocks that the pigs are getting. It's where the oldest son comes to, when he sees his father running down the road, and realizes that his whole identity is founded in a lie. Stuff like that shakes you to your core. And the sad truth of it is...sometimes that's where we have to get to, in order for God to get through to us. I don't know why that is, and I sure don't like it...but it seems to be true sometimes.

So there is hope...maybe...for this older son, to climb out of the mess his life has fallen into...and come into the light of his father's untamed, wild, love. Jesus leaves it pretty open there at the end. This parable is essentially unfinished...which is I guess because it is about each of us, isn't it? What is it going to take, to bring us to the place where we can just let go of our need to be right. And be loved instead. Sinners get that. Prodigals get that. People who have hit rock-bottom get that. And those of us in church...we Pharisees and scribes...we religious leaders... I think sometimes it's harder for us to get that. It's an uphill battle.

Here's what I know. God is waiting. It doesn't matter how old you are. It doesn't matter how long you have lived with this weighty sense of responsibility, or rectitude, or the need for approval...wherever you're seeking approval from...whatever. It doesn't matter! Love is hard work! And then you come to a place where love is all that matters. Because love is all there is. And that love...the kind of love that sends you off running down the road...that kind of love is the great trump card! It overcomes death. That's the last line of this parable. And when the father says it, it sends a chill up my spine, because I think he means it exactly as he says it in the parable: "This brother of yours was dead. He was dead. And he's come back to life." And the promise...the open hand, that the father holds out for his oldest son... "Maybe you're dead too, and you can come back to life. You've just got to take my hand, and come running down the road with me." Amen