

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday March 14, 2010

Lent 4C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the Name of our one ever-living God who creates abundantly, loves extravagantly and sustains eternally: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I read today's Gospel lesson, I thought of an old Southern maxim: "It's a poor family indeed that can't afford one sport!" But this one takes that to the extreme. Today's Gospel lesson is probably a familiar one. My study Bible has a caption calling it "The parable of the Prodigal and his Brother." That is, of course, part of the story, but I think whoever edited the titles really missed the mark on this one. Is it really about the sons?

I think it would be helpful to locate ourselves in Luke's narrative and place this parable into its context within Luke's story of the events surrounding the life of Jesus. Jesus has already predicted twice that the civil and religious leaders would kill him in Jerusalem. He and his disciples are now on the road to Jerusalem going from Galilee into Judea getting closer and closer to the final confrontation. Along the way, Jesus is doing a lot of teaching and healing. Jesus was attracting big crowds and all sorts of people were coming to listen to him. It seems that even all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to him. You know – Those People! This was upsetting to the pious Pharisees and the scribes learned in the law. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them," they grumbled. In their eyes, anyone associating with and especially eating with sinners were themselves defiled and were considered religiously and ritually impure.

In response, Jesus tells two familiar parables – the one about the lost sheep out of the flock of 100 - how the shepherd leaves the 99 to find the lost one and the one about the lost coin – about the woman who lost one of her 10 drachma (each worth about a day's wages) and

sweeps the house until she finds it. Jesus is making a point about the nature of God when he says that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous ones with no need to repent. In both cases, the value of the lost item – a single sheep or a single coin – is not particularly great. However, to God, all are important. The mercy of God in these cases is shown not to the group but to the lost one, to the outsider. In God’s eyes we all matter – especially the lost ones.

Have you noticed that whenever something gets lost its value and meaning seem to get greater? I may never have thought about something for months, but when it goes missing its importance goes way up in my consciousness! It seems God is like that too.

Now Jesus is telling a parable about human beings. He is bringing the lesson home. In this story, both sons are in effect wishing the father dead. The younger one in effect says that he can’t wait for his father to die so “give me my inheritance now so I can leave you.” He gets not only the right to occupy the land but also the right to dispose of it, which he does. The father is a fool. Now he and the older son have only half the land upon which they must now support themselves. The audience would be horrified at the father’s lack of judgment.

It only gets worse. The son blows through all the money in dissolute living and is forced to be a pig herder for foreigners. That’s about as bad as it can get for a nice Jewish boy! Coming to his senses, the son resolves to return home, declare his unworthiness to be treated like a son and to ask to become a hired hand of his father instead. The father sees him coming and runs to greet him, hugging and kissing him. The son starts to recite his well-rehearsed act of contrition, but the father breezes right by that one and starts commanding the servants to bring his son garments. Notice that they are not just plain garments but the best ones. The father goes beyond caring for the returning child, but is now bestowing signs of honor on him, thus restoring him to his position as son.

Jesus’ listeners would by now be horrified. What kind of respectable and responsible father

would behave like this? The man is behaving like a mother with her judgment besotted by her heart. And it gets even worse! Now the father orders up a feast with a fatted calf and music to celebrate the reprobate's return. Jesus' listeners are now thinking, "Good lord! Now he's throwing away good money after bad. No wonder the kid turned out the way he did!"

Now the older brother enters the picture. When the servants tell him what's going on, he is furious! Jesus' listeners would be thinking, "Damn right! He should be furious." To be honest, if I were in the same situation, I'd probably be angry as well. The father comes out to speak with the older son to plead with him to come into the party and to celebrate the return of his brother. The older son would have none of that! The story ends with the father still trying to convince the older one that all he has is also the oldest son's and he can still celebrate the return of his brother who was dead but has come to life, who was lost, but now is found.

Jesus is challenging the Pharisee and scribes' view of God. Jesus portrays a God that not only accepts repentant sinners but also actively goes out looking for them and accepts them without prior requirements beyond a change of heart and without regard to social conventions. This is obviously causing confusion on the part of some and consternation on the part of the Scribes and Pharisees. The genius of this parable is that Jesus puts the traditional view of God in the story as the older brother. It is there in the open to be considered.

The older son accuses the father of having taken him for granted. But the truth is that it is the older son who has taken his right to inherit for granted. He feels he has earned it by his work and thus is entitled to it. In his mind the father is already dead and the older son is sticking around in order to conserve and hoard his share. The younger son through his foolishness has been brought to the point of realizing that his existence is dependent on the Father, but the older son has yet to realize this. In his mind, he is still entitled to his father's property.

The irony is that it is the outcast who has a change of heart and thus attains reconciliation and right relationship with the father whereas the other son stands outside filled with anger and

resentment at both the father and his brother. In fact he cannot bring himself to call him “brother” but refers to his brother in harsh judgmental tones as “this son of yours”.

But where is the Father at the end of all this? Is he inside being merry with the son who was dead but now has come back to life? No, he is outside with the angry older son who is pointing his finger in judgment and refuses to go into the feast the father has prepared for all. The story leads us to try to choose between the two brothers. But the story is not about the brothers, but about God – a God who refuses to favor one or the other but who has enough grace to love both sons and to seek family reconciliation. Here the father rejects no one but embraces and values both. In short, God has enough grace for both although at this point only the younger repentant son realizes it.

The parable ends on a note of hope. The father is still there out in the cold with the angry son waiting for him to see that he is loved for himself and not in competition with his brother; that there is enough grace and life for everyone.

I think that this parable is especially one for our times. Just as it challenges the Biblical theme of the favored younger son being placed over the rejected older son (Abraham favoring Isaac and sending away Ishmael; Jacob and his mother scheming to steal Esau’s blessing as the eldest), it challenges the judgmental, finger-wagging anger that we find in our larger culture and even in the Church.

It is not just the newly minted “tea baggers” who are standing outside angrily venting rage and pointing fingers. This win-lose winner-take-all mentality is as rampant as it is futile. Did you notice which son comes to understand his dependence on his father? Did you notice which son basks in his father’s attention? Did you notice which son is reconciled with the father? A sense of entitlement, anger, and jealousy and resentment can blind us to a lot of things. If we recognize that we all are ultimately dependent upon God and that in God’s eyes there are no outcasts only brothers who need to be reconciled, then we can work towards solutions that

benefit all. This is not easy and the current environment is not conducive to it. I don't know about you, but I don't do my best thinking when I am angry. Anger puts me in a "fight or flight" mode where I cannot truly recognize the issue or problem let alone rationally look for solutions. People who seek to instill anger in us do us no service.

But the parable ends with hope. The Father is not in the house enjoying his party but is outside in the cold, reasoning with the older son. If we all insist on standing outside angrily pointing fingers then we will never go in to enjoy the feast the Father has ordered prepared for us.

Amen.