

Lost Sons Of The Forgiving Father

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

March 18, 2007

I.

Today's reading is one of the greatest and most well-known bible stories of all time. It has been at the foundation of Sunday School courses and Vacation Bible School courses, and has been portrayed in art, drama and literature over the centuries. It truly illustrates the pillars of the Christian faith.

The story frequently has been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But that doesn't have to be its name, does it? It also could be called the Parable of the Forgiving Father. And what about the Parable of the Jealous Brother?

In my view, it is all three. It is a three act drama magnificently organized with one act following directly from the other, and it contains all of the elements of greed, tragedy, pathos, jealousy, and morality that might be found in many of our literary classics

And part of the fascination with this story is its ability to resonate with our own lives. How many of us actually have been the prodigal son or daughter. How many of us, at some point in our lives, have been the forgiving father or mother. And how many of us can recall being the jealous brother or sister?

II.

With those questions as food for thought, let's look at the parable itself. When we study it in detail it seems to have some unusual components that might not seem realistic, and it also raises some unanswered questions that might distract us from its real message.

For starters, we have to realize that it is a parable; which in the ordinary definition of the term is a fictional story told to illustrate a particular religious or moral idea, or some heavenly truth. Jesus frequently used this device in his teaching, and according to my study Bible there are twenty eight parables in the Gospel of Luke alone.

And it's likely that many of these parables do not reflect things that actually happened, but rather were created by Jesus to illustrate a larger point. In the secular world we have similar stories about the tortoise and the hare, or the ant and the grasshopper, which also contain moral teachings.

Now, that does not mean that all parables have no foundation in fact. Perhaps Jesus used some of his own experiences, or things that he witnessed, and built parables around them.

But the point of all this is that it is possible to study a parable too closely, and to get caught up in trying to reconcile or understand some questions that really don't have anything to do with the points Jesus was trying to make.

Examples in today's reading include the highly unusual request of the younger son. He wanted his share of the inheritance while his father was still alive, which was completely contrary to traditions of the time. In effect he treated his father as if he already was dead. His request to his father was an insult. But apparently the father said, "O.K." with no questions asked. He didn't even ask what his son wanted to do with the money.

How likely is that really to have happened? But don't get distracted by that. It's not important. It doesn't help us focus on the parable's purpose.

And then look at the sequence of events. The younger soon took the money and went to a far country. Then he spent it all on wild living. And then conveniently for the story there was a famine, and the son was forced to live with the pigs, which would have been one of the worse things that could have happened to a Jew. Again, the story had to unfold in this way to set up the points Jesus wanted to make. Don't worry if it seems a little too pat. That's what a parable is.

And what about the younger son's return and acceptance by the father as part of the family again? Does that mean that he gets to inherit another share all over again? Or does the older brother now get it all because the younger son got his earlier? Again, these are questions that leap off the page, but have little to do with the meaning Jesus sought to convey.

So, what is the purpose of the parable? What are the teachings that Jesus hoped to leave with his listeners? As I said earlier, this is a three part drama that illustrates three basic doctrine fundamental to our faith. Let's look at them in order.

III.

We'll start with the younger son. And to give you the short answer in advance, I will tell you that the son represents all sinners, and that true repentance will produce forgiveness and acceptance that once might have been lost.

And that's true, even if it might not seem fair. Look at this younger son more closely. Perhaps his motive for going home was not entirely praiseworthy, and he only did it because he had no choice. Perhaps if his money had not run out, or if there had been no famine in the foreign land, he would have been happy to stay right where he was.

But that's not the point. He did repent, and he did confess his sins. Many acts of repentance and confessions seem to come when there is no other choice, and that's fine with God, as long as we mean it. All sinners, no matter how notorious, wicked, or desperate can be forgiven, and the younger son in today's lesson is no exception.

You might remember Pat Paulsen, a comedian who ran for the presidency in 1968 as a form of satire, and found that a few people actually took him seriously. During one of his campaign stops he was talking about the problems and difficulties of America's prison system, and said that his solution would be to have higher quality prisoners.

What about sinners? Does our Lord only listen to higher quality sinners? Of course not. Just like the younger son, no matter what we have done, and no matter how our choices may have been limited, and even if we have no other choice—especially if we have no other choice—we can always turn to our Lord and Savior who will intercede with God on our behalf.

IV.

Understanding this parable from the father's perspective, which is act two of the drama, picks right up where act one left off. And the point here is that the father in the parable is the image of God in our lives, and that God in his grace will forgive us. And by God's grace I refer to gifts from God that have nothing to do with whether or not we deserve them.

St. Paul tells us that God's grace is the active work of God within us to do his will even though it is unmerited, and is freely given to us notwithstanding our demerits. In a way, it is God's favor and blessing gratuitously given to us who actually might deserve his wrath.

And the father in the parable exemplifies this in every way. He warmly greeted his son, he did not try to rub it in, he did not say "I told you so," and he didn't even let his son finish his apology and confession before he embraced him.

This act two of the drama is especially important to us. Do any of us have a child, or a parent, or a friend who we have cast away because of something they did to us and therefore we thought we had to respond in kind? Have any of us been in situations, or are we in situations now, where we are estranged from someone we once cherished because of some injustice or slight or wrong done to us?

What does today's lesson say about that? It shows us that those situations are not beyond our ability to redeem. It calls us to be forgiving, and to celebrate the hope of reconciliation and acceptance. It calls us to do what the father did for the younger son, which is what our God will do for us.

V.

And now we come to the final act, the older son. Why is this part of the story even here? If the parable only concerned repentance and forgiveness, then the whole thing could have ended when the younger son returned. Why do we even need to hear about the part about the older son? There must be something more, or Jesus would not have included it.

Again, the short answer is that this older son thought he was entitled to his father's favor because he had worked for it; because he had earned it. After all, he had been loyal and stayed home on the farm while his younger brother had behaved in a totally irresponsible way.

And viewed by standards of the secular world perhaps we can sympathize a little with the older son. The best way to get ahead in the world is to do a good job. We get promoted on the basis of merit. Our performance evaluations are intended to show whether we deserve advancement.

Judged by worldly standards some of us might have been really successful in doing things right and making all the right moves. Perhaps we can look back on our lives and say that we served our employers well, or that we served our nation well, or that we just did a good job.

That's fine, but that's in this world. Sympathy for the older son might be understood in the world we have built; a world of political systems, economic and educational institutions, and all the other ingredients of our great nation that we have created through our ambition, our inventiveness, our bravery, and all those fruits of our lives that surround and protect us. And most of these are good things.

But there is another world inseparably intertwined with the world that we see. It is the world of the Spirit in which we know God, where the standards are different. It is a world where pride in our success means little because in this world we never can truly measure up all the time. Sometime or another we always fall, make mistakes, and separate ourselves from God. That's why God's grace is so important. Living by merit may be necessary in the secular world. Living by grace is necessary in God's world.

And so the older brother missed the point. Even though his father told him that he always was with him and that all that the father had was also the son's, the son's perspective was a narrowly self-centered one based in his world rather than God's world.

VI.

With this background perhaps we can see how this parable comes together to be so important to the Christian faith. Just as the father and the two sons were the main players in each of the three acts to the drama, their roles set forth three fundamental principles that Jesus wanted his listeners to grasp and understand.

The first, drawn from the story of the younger son, is that repentance will reconcile us with God when we have gone wrong. The second, evidenced by the story of the father, is that salvation is through God's grace, freely given to all who turn to him. The third, illustrated by the older son, is that our own merits earn us nothing in God's eyes in terms of acceptance by him into his kingdom.

Now that does not mean that works are irrelevant. Good works are the natural and inexorable result of a sincere faith. And good works also are closely linked to ideas of sanctification and the fruits of living an increasingly holy life, but that is another sermon.

For today, the message from today's parable is that salvation by faith is through God's grace, and it does not depend on our works. The first cannot be true unless the second is also true. Otherwise it would not be grace.

VII.

So, no matter what mistakes or poor choices we think we have made, and no matter how deep our sorrow or strong our sense of unfairness about events in our lives, we know that we can be redeemed and restored by grace if we call upon God.

The younger son expressed his repentance, the father expressed his love, and we do not know what finally happened with the older brother. Perhaps he joined the celebration, and perhaps he did not. His choice reflects the choices we all have in similar circumstances; our merit or God's grace.

As we move through Lent, past Good Friday, and into the glory of Easter, we will continue to see today's parable in the cross, and the resurrection, and in the Christian hope that it promises. *Amen.*