
Lent: a season of forgiveness
Martin Grove United Church
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Based on Luke 15

I hope we all recognized the famous story from the gospel today. I imagine it's the second best-known gospel story of them all, assuming that the *best*-known story is the story of the good samaritan. Both those stories are so well known that they have infused our modern culture. Whether you are Christian or not, you know those two stories!

And remind me - what's the name of the gospel story we just read? Really? You think the story is called "The Prodigal Son"? Well, I won't say that you are wrong, but I don't think that's a very good name for that story. But I suppose it depends a bit on who you think the story is about. It depends on what you think the story is about. Who is the main character of the story?

[who is this story about?]

[where do you see yourself in this story?]

Well, there are at least three people who you might consider as the "main character" of the story.

One option - obviously - is the prodigal son. The younger of the two sons who takes his inheritance and spends it on "fast living", and then returns - broke and hungry - to his father hoping to at least be considered a slave in his father's house. Given that the traditional name for this story is in fact, "The Prodigal Son", it would make sense that the younger son is the main character.

But many people would argue that the story is more about the father, and that the story should be called "The Forgiving Father" or something like that. There are good reasons for seeing the father as the main character. For one thing, the father acts in a way that we don't really expect. His actions are surprising. It takes very little imagination to picture the younger son wasting the parent's money, but it's much harder to imagine the father who waits for his son's return, and rejoices immediately when the prodigal son returns, without even wanting his son to go through some sort of "probation" period to

see if the son has really learned anything at all about the value of family and the value of money. If you go to youtube to find different versions of the prodigal son story, you will find a number of cartoonish videos that emphasize the role of the father in the story. In some of those videos, the father is the main figure even to the point that the older son is missing entirely from the story.

And what about the older son. Can anyone here imagine that the older son is the main character of the story? Well, I can very easily imagine that myself, and it disturbs me that the story doesn't really have an ending for the older son. We never do discover if the older son goes inside to enjoy the party, or if his self-pity is stronger than his desire to reconnect with his brother, and he remains outside, alone and disconnected. If you can't imagine the older son being the main character of the story ... we'll come to that later.

The story of the prodigal son has often been seen as an analogy for the early Jesus movement. I would say it's an analogy for the early Church, except that the story likely came from Jesus himself, and in Jesus's day the idea of a "church", or even a "Christian" would have been unimaginable. In Jesus day, all he had were his own followers. But to understand the likely original meaning of the story of the prodigal son, I adapted the lectionary reading to include more of Luke today. And I did that because I believe that the secret to understanding the story of the prodigal son requires a bit more of the story. At the beginning of our reading we had, "Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'". And then right after that, Luke gives us 3 parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. For Luke, the point is that Jesus went after the lost and the "sinners", which indicates God's concern for those who have fallen out. These parables, then, defend Jesus's practice of fraternizing with outcasts and "sinners". And the audience for these 3 parables is perhaps primarily the pharisees, not the disciples.

In any case, as the analogy goes: the father figure represents God. The older son represents the Pharisees and others who wanted to follow the religious rules and regulations and remain "pure". The younger son represents the common people, the

“sinners” and outcasts - essentially all those people that Jesus spoke and ate with - people who the Pharisees considered not worthy of God’s grace. But in the story, the father demonstrates radical grace and mercy for all people. The father values having the whole family (the religious leaders and the outcasts) together more than following the rules or being fair based on human standards. The father - God - is the source of forgiveness and mercy to all people, both the prodigal son and the older son. The father extends mercy for the outcasts - that’s obvious in the story. But the father also extends mercy to people like the older son - people who felt they had followed all the religious rules and expected to be treated better than outcasts. But in the story, both sons are important. Both sons are invited to the celebration of God’s love.

So perhaps this well-known story really boils down to Jesus defending his principles to the Pharisees, the principle of acceptance of all people. The principle of the importance of seeking out and supporting outcasts. The principle of engaging with outcasts where they live. The principle that God’s mercy is beyond what our puny hearts can imagine.

So much for history. What might these parables mean for us? Those 3 parables, given back-to-back, perhaps help us to understand better what Luke was driving at. But I feel some obligation to point out that biblical scholars generally warn readers not to push the details of these stories too far. If we squeeze these stories too hard, it is just possible that deeper meanings will slip between our fingers.

For example, in the story of the missing sheep, it seems to be an exaggeration to imagine that the shepherd would abandon 99 sheep to their own defences while the shepherd was off finding 1 lost sheep. And the lost coin in the parable of the lost coin is also interesting. The coin is lost, but not in a moral sense. It is simply that the woman has been careless with her limited funds. Do we applaud the woman for being diligent, or do we chastise her for being careless in the first place. And in the story of the prodigal son, we would have to ask what sane parent would split their inheritance while they are still using it themselves? By todays standards, the young son is spoiled beyond belief, and the father is completely ineffective at saying “no” to his son. So - perhaps the exact

details of these parables are not so helpful to us. Perhaps deeper truths will emerge if we step back and look at the bigger picture. But what does that mean? What does it mean here in Rexdale in 2016?

Perhaps that question takes us back to where we started. Who do you relate to in the story? If the father represents God, then I imagine nobody in this room will admit to relating to the father. So that leaves the 2 sons. And I want to imagine the father reflecting on the story himself a week or so after the big reunion celebration. And I want to imagine that the older son did - in fact - go in and join in the party. And in his reflection, the father remembers that he said he needed to celebrate because “my son was lost, and now he is found.”. But the question is, which son was he talking about?

The prodigal son was lost in that he was not home. He was at an unknown location and the father didn’t know how the prodigal son was feeling. But the older son was really just as lost. Sure, his location was known, but the father had no idea how the older son was feeling. The father didn’t know that the older son carried resentment and perhaps even hatred for his brother. And that resentment and hatred was transferred to the father when the father openly accepted the prodigal son back into the family with no strings attached.

In general - but during Lent particularly - it’s a good chance to reflect on whether we ourselves carry any resentments that we need to let go of. We - like the older son - need to deal with any regrets or resentments that we carry ourselves so that we can be free to go inside and join in the celebration of God’s grace. And since I’ve been asked to preach longer sermons, I plan to finish this reflection on Good Friday.

For now, I will just point out that in the Lord’s prayer, we say, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive others”. Who do we need to forgive so that we can join the party? And come back on Good Friday for the exciting conclusion!

Lent is a season of forgiveness.

Amen.