

The Heart of Christianity
The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C
Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

Jesus told some wonderful stories, but the one in today's Gospel reading is perhaps his best-known and best-loved. It's the parable of the Prodigal Son, and in so many ways it reveals the heart of Christianity. If Jesus were telling it today it might go something like this:

There was a man who had two sons. One day the younger son came to his father and said, "When you die I'm going to get some of your money, right?" "Yes," his father answered, not sure where this was going. "Well, I've been thinking about that," the younger son said, "and I think I want it now." The Father didn't know what to say. On one hand the son was absolutely right—he was going to get the money someday—but asking for it now was a little bit like saying, "I wish you were dead." He said, "Let me talk it over with my accountant and I'll see what I can do."

So, he did, and his accountant told him it was a terrible idea. As long as the money was his he would make interest on it, but if he gave it to his son all that would be gone. "It would be a huge loss," the accountant said, and the Father nodded. It already felt like a huge loss. But he sighed and told the accountant to make the arrangements anyway and when everything was settled he called his son into his office and presented him with a check. "Here," he said. "I hope it makes you happy."

The boy looked at the check and smiled. It made him happy, all right; it made him *very* happy. Without so much as a thank you he headed home to stuff some clothes into a backpack. He could hardly wait to get away. He took a cab to the airport and just

stood there for a while looking at the “Departures” board. He could go anywhere he wanted—L.A., Chicago, Atlanta—but he finally decided that he wanted to go to New York and bought a round-trip ticket with an open-ended return. An hour later he was boarding his flight and two hours later he was getting into a cab at JFK. “Take me to the Four Seasons,” he told the cabbie (because if you’re going to stay in the city you might as well stay in style).

And he did.

He checked into a deluxe room with a terrace on the 19th floor, bought some new clothes at Armani, and had enough time left over for a full spa treatment. By the time he went down to the hotel bar he looked like a new man...and the women noticed.

I think I can sum it up like this: that if you’ve got lots of money to spend and you don’t mind spending it you will find yourself surrounded by friends. They will drink with you, laugh with you, and even pretend that they love you, but when the money runs out you may find yourself friendless, which is exactly what happened to that prodigal son. He kept thinking that he would rent an apartment that wouldn’t cost him so much, that he would get a job to pay his bills, but it was hard to focus on those things when he was having so much fun! Spring turned to summer, summer to fall, and fall turned to winter. He stayed at the hotel through all four seasons, and in less time than he could have imagined he had burned through that huge pile of money. One January morning the hotel manager came knocking on his door, telling him his time was up. His bank account was overdrawn, his Visa card maxed out, and still he owed the hotel thousands. The manager threw him out without even giving him time to get a shower.

He stood on the street shivering in a rumpled Armani suit, carrying the same old backpack he had brought to New York six months earlier. He scrolled through the numbers on his cell phone and called one after another asking Jennifer, Isabelle, and Mykeesha if he could come and crash for a while. They all said no. He went inside a McDonald's to get warm but they finally told him that if he wasn't a customer he'd have to leave. He fished around in his pocket for some change so he could buy something, but there was nothing there. He looked in his wallet and found nothing but that maxed out Visa card. He stumbled out onto the street and into the cold and by three o'clock that afternoon he was freezing, and starving. He ended up over in Hell's Kitchen, where somebody told him he could get some food and maybe a bed for the night. At six o'clock he sat in a room with a hundred other homeless men, slurping down a bowl of soup and hoping that he would be one of the lucky ones who got a bed.

It went on like that for six weeks, each day a desperate bid for survival, each night a misery of tossing and turning on an iron cot with a hundred men sleeping and snoring and stinking all around him. Almost every night he dreamed of home, of his own room with clean sheets on the bed and thick carpeting on the floor, of those meals around the family table and the warmth of his father's smile. One night he got his backpack out from under his cot and unzipped a forgotten side pocket. He couldn't see it but he could feel it; it was still in there: the other half of his round trip ticket. With tears trickling down his cheeks he made up his mind to go home.

It took him most of the next day to get to the airport. He had to walk downtown and bum enough money for the shuttle. He wasn't having much luck until he made a cardboard sign that read: "Trying to get home to my Father." An older man in an

expensive suit stopped and looked at that sign for a long time. Finally he wiped his eyes, pulled out his wallet, and gave the boy a hundred dollar bill. “Maybe somebody will do the same for my son someday,” he said.

The boy’s father saw the cab coming while it was still a half mile from the house. He jumped out of his chair and ran down the drive to meet it. His bathrobe was flying out behind him as he ran. One of his slippers came off. It was embarrassing, but he didn’t care. He yanked the door open and hauled his son up into his arms. He hugged him and wept on his neck. He kept saying over and over again, “My son, my son, my son!” The boy tried to get a word in edgewise, tried to tell his dad how sorry he was for what he’d done, but the Father wasn’t listening. He finally took the boy by both shoulders, looked him in the eye and said, “Tonight we are going to have the biggest party this town has ever seen. I don’t care how much it costs; I want everybody to know I got my boy back. *I got my boy back!* I thought you were dead, but look at you...alive! I thought I had lost you forever, but here you are...found.”

It’s a story of reconciliation, a story about how God loves us no matter how much we’ve sinned, and how he is always ready and willing to welcome us home. And perhaps I should pause right there long enough to say that if you are one of those people who feels that you’ve messed up so badly you can never be forgiven this story is in the Bible to let you know that you can be, that the Father is waiting with open arms. All you have to do is come home. For the longest time I thought that’s all there was to the story: that reconciliation between Father and son. But Jesus begins this story by saying that a certain man had *two* sons, and even before that is the reason he told the story in the first

place: because the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling and saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” I get the feeling that Jesus is not only trying to help the scribes and Pharisees understand that God loves sinners, he’s trying to help the scribes and Pharisees love sinners, to understand that if God is the father of all of us we are all members of the same family, and he does it by telling the story of the older brother.

In this version the older brother has just come back from a business trip when he sees all the lights on in the house, a few dozen cars parked in the yard. He asks the valet what’s going on and he tells him: “Your brother is back.” And that’s all it takes. The older brother yanks his BMW into the garage and squeals to a stop. He’s furious. He won’t even go into the house. He walks around to the back and looks in through the window where he sees the party in full swing. There’s a live band; people are talking and laughing and dancing; the place is packed. But the older brother stands in the back yard, pouting by the pool. Finally the Father sees him out there and goes out to ask, “What’s the matter? Why aren’t you inside at the party?” “What’s the *matter?*” the boy says, sputtering. “I’ll tell you what’s the matter! I know what you did. I know you gave that no-good son of yours half the family fortune. And I know he went off to New York and blew it all on booze and whores. He’s a filthy, stinking drunk, and yet you welcome him home like he’s the King of Siam! Meanwhile, here I am, slaving away in your company, working sixteen hours a day with no overtime, and you don’t even have a backyard barbecue for me and my friends. I guess I’ll have to rob a bank or shoot somebody before I get your attention!”

And that broke the father's heart.

It broke his heart because he loved his sons. He loved both his sons, and he wanted them to love each other. In his house there were many rooms but his sons had rooms right next to each other, and if there was ever going to be any peace in the family they would have to get along. And so he said, "Son, you've been with me this whole time, and everything I have is yours. There isn't a thing you could ask for that I wouldn't give you. But when your brother came home we had to celebrate. It was the only right thing to do! He was as good as dead and here he is alive again. He was lost and gone forever, but now here he is...found."

The word *reconcile* comes from an old Latin word that means to "make friendly again," and it's what the father in this story works to do: to make things friendly again between himself and his younger son, and then to make things friendly again between that son and his older brother. I see Jesus doing that even as he tells this story. He puts his arm around the sinners and tax collectors to help them understand that there is nothing they can do that will separate them from the love of God, that the Father is even now waiting to welcome them home. And then he puts an arm around the scribes and Pharisees to remind them that these sinners and tax collectors are also part of God's family, and that when they make up their minds to come home it's only right to throw a party. Jesus is working to make things friendly again between us and God, and us and others, and that's just what Paul said he came to do.

In today's Epistle reading Paul says that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of

reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:19). In other words, what Jesus was sent to do is what we’ve been sent to do, to put our arms around sinners and see if we can make things friendly again between them and God. But also to put our arms around the self-righteous, and see if we can make things friendly again between them and sinners. And that’s hard, because some of the self-righteous are us. How many times have we turned up our noses at the sinners and tax collectors God has invited to his party? How many times have we grumbled just like those scribes and Pharisees because they weren’t “our kind” of people?

This ministry of reconciliation is the heart of Christianity, and it was born in the heart of the Father. He has invited the whole world to his party. The only people who stand in the outer darkness are those who don’t think they are good enough to come in or those who think they are too good to party with “those people.” Do you remember how hard it was for Jewish Christians to accept Gentiles in the Book of Acts? Do you remember how hard it was for white churches to welcome black members just a few decades ago? How many others has God invited to his party while we stand in the backyard with our arms crossed, thinking that if those people are going to be there we’d just as soon skip it? Still God is patient with us. He comes outside, puts an arm around our shoulder, and reminds us: “This is my party, and you’re invited, but you don’t have to come. If you’d rather remain in the outer darkness, weeping and gnashing your teeth, it’s entirely up to you. But me? I’m going back inside. Because there’s a party going on in there, and the grace is flowing like champagne.”

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