

Date: Sunday March 14, 2010

Scripture: Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

Title: “A Very Famous Story”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): The story of the Prodigal Son.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): The real story is that of God as prodigal father and God’s extravagant and reckless loved shared with us all.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

The new pastor had just arrived in town and was only into his third week of serving a church when he received a call from the funeral director asking him if he could hold a graveside service at a small country cemetery. Because the deceased had no friends or family that the funeral director knew of, it would just be the pastor and the funeral director. Because of another funeral scheduled for the same day, the funeral director told the pastor they would have to meet at the graveside. He shared driving directions.

The pastor got started to the cemetery early enough, which was a ways out of town. The pastor got lost along the way. He stopped for directions, got straightened out, and arrived at the burial site. He was thirty minutes late. Obviously, this was in the days before cell phones.

Because he was late he noticed that the funeral director and the hearse were already gone. He saw the grave diggers sitting under a tree eating lunch. He spotted the newly dug grave and made his way over. He saw the vault which was in place. He opened the book of worship and began offering the prayers and scripture

readings. He briefly preached about the love of God.

After about fifteen minutes he finished. With a final silent prayer, he turned and made his way back to the car, waving to the workers still under the tree. They waved back. Then he heard one of them say, “I’ve been digging septic tanks for thirty years. That’s the first time I ever saw one prayed and preached for” (Miller).

Now that’s a pretty well known church story. I have shared it before and some of you have heard it before. There are other church stories we can share and enjoy repeatedly and there are stories of various genres that as we come to know them, they impact our lives. “Green Eggs and Ham,” “Cather in the Rye,” and “Twas the Night Before Christmas,” just to name three. A good story is a gift. On this fourth Sunday of Lent we are lifting up one of the most famous stories ever told.

Two of the things that make for great story are the way we can follow the story, this is called the plot, and the characters of the story. Last Sunday night was the Academy Awards. It is not just to add time to an already extra long telecast that awards are given for best acting. It is done because characters are key to story and so the actors who best bring characters to life are recognized. Powerful characters develop and grow within the story line. They are three dimensional; they seem real, which means we can identify with the experiences of the character. When we forget we are watching an actor, and we begin to believe we are watching a real person, it is a sign the actor is doing his or her job. This all, of course, feeds the plot and adds tremendously to the overall arc of the story.

Well Jesus is a master story teller and the characters of his stories appear to be quite natural and this helps to draw in listeners. Often when Jesus is telling a story we forget that we are listening to Jesus and just find ourselves absorbed right into the story. That's another sign of a powerful story. When this happens not only do we form connections with the characters but we also discover commentaries that the characters offer about their situation that has application to our own lives. So when we can learn from a story, it is a beneficial experience.

The story we find in today's Gospel lesson is a beautiful and moving story that enfolds us. It has been told and retold for thousands of years. You have heard it before and I have preached on it previously. I learn from it each time I read and study it. I hope you learn as we experience it together again in worship.

It is entitled, "The Prodigal Son." However, I must say that the title of the story can be confusing and misleading for it frames the story and focuses our attention on one of the sons. One of the things we can appreciate about the Bible is that as we go through life, we see *all* of the characters begin to come to life and *all* of the characters have something to teach us about life depending on where we are in life. *All* of the characters offer roles we have either played or watched others play. So with this story, I remind myself and all of you, to stay open to the experiences of all the characters (Spinks).

Still, there is no question I lived through my prodigal son days. Did you? Remember the days we would have gladly told our parents to "Get lost. Get out of my life. Leave me alone. Let me take what's mine and get out of this boring

place!” When I read about the younger brother in today’s story, I immediately remember my teen years and early twenties. Those were the years I wanted to do whatever it took to get out on my own, and live my life the way I wanted; although that feeling can happen to us at any age.

Still, our teens and twenties are often when we strike out on our own, make decisions not well thought out, choose unwise financial moves, hang around with the wrong crowd, and finally, maybe, begin to realize that our parents were not as dumb as we thought they were. Some of that can also happen at any age. But it is after many of the experiences from our teens and twenties that we realize we could actually use some of that parental advice and help. As we live and learn from life, we begin to think that maybe it’s time we travel home with a slightly different attitude and see what we find. As the old saying goes, after a few years of living on my own, I was surprised at just how wise my parents had become.

I also assume that all of us have played the role of the elder brother in today’s story. You know, the older brother was the responsible one, the one who is always right, the one who is quick to rub it in with, “I told you so.” This is the one who knows exactly how things should be done, who makes sure every “t” is crossed and every “i” dotted. This is the one who can’t believe his father is letting his younger brother get away with this foolishness (Spinks) (“How come he gets to stay up as later than I did. How come he gets to watch TV shows I couldn’t watch? How come his piece of cake is bigger than my piece of cake)? How come, how come, how come? Have you ever used those words? I know I have.

What is fascinating in this story though is how each brother doesn't quite get what he expects. The younger brother comes back willing to be a servant, but the father insists on accepting him back as a son with all the responsibilities that entails. The older brother cannot believe the father is throwing the younger brother a party and wants to know "how come" and if he will get his own party. The father responds, "All that is mine is yours" (Luke 15:31).

But do you know which role is the hardest to identify with in this story? Do you know what the word *prodigal* means? According to Webster's Dictionary it means to be wasteful; spending recklessly, one who spends recklessly, and reckless extravagance (Webster's). In that regard it could apply to the son, but really, the true prodigal in this story is not the son, it is the father. The kind of recklessly extravagant love the father of this story offers makes this the hardest role of all to play. His willingness to let the younger son go and then to accept him back with a party, a pure love party, recklessly extravagant with no strings attached, or at least none the story relays to us, that's a hard part to play! This father's willingness to reach out to both his sons, one he knew was angry at him; the son looking at him with disapproving eyes for how he was accepting his younger brother back after all he had done, and the willingness to embrace that younger son knowing all he had done, all he had given away, and all of the family's fortune that had been lost, that's not easy either.

God's love calls us to learn to share our love with all we meet. To be willing to minister to the lost, the lonely, the brokenhearted, the poor, the disposed, the one

living away from here, the neighbor living close to here, the displaced, the desolate, the abandoned, even if we feel it is their fault that they are where they are in life. Even if we feel they deserve what they got. We are called to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, help the needy, visit the sick and imprisoned, and to reach out in love – reckless, extravagant love, and to love the unlovable, the outcasts, the misfits, even the ones who hurt us the most which usually are members of our own family (Spinks).

So it is easy to play the role of prodigal son and the elder brother; we are type cast for those parts. But there really is only one who can play the part of the father. There is only One who is the prodigal father, sharing radical, reckless love, welcoming us with open arms every step of our journey. That One, of course, is God, and that reckless, extravagant, love is very good news for us all.

Yes, God's love is shared with people everywhere and no matter how lost we maybe – even in the middle of nowhere at the site of a septic tank, God's love can be found. It is a love found here (in the bible), here (in the congregation), and here (in our hearts). God's love offers the plot and characters for this very famous Biblical story and God's love makes possible the greatest story being told. Thanks be to God for our life story. Let us pray.

Lord,

You let loose your love on us. We are grateful. But the question becomes, what will we do about it? We hope to be your children willing to share your love with others just as generous as you share with us. So we try. With thanksgiving we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Offering: At this time, let us show our appreciation for God's love through our morning offering. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, we ask that you accept and bless this offering. We seek to know more ways to use it for telling the story of your love with the entire world. This we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth storytellers and tell of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, and Jesus and his love. We are blessed by that love, so go and tell. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Miller, Paul – Editor; “World’s Greatest Collection of Church Jokes”; Barbour Publishers: Uhrichsville, OH; 2003.

Spinks, Deborah; The Minister’s Annual Manual; Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, MN; 2009.

“Webster’s Dictionary”; P.S.I. & Associates: Miami, FL; 1987.