

March 14, 2010
Lent 4

2 Corinthians 4:14-21
Luke 15:1-32

When we listen to Scripture, we hear it through our own experience of the world. This is understandable, because certainly if we hear nothing to which we can connect, Scripture will not be meaningful for us. But we always need to remember that while Scripture is eternal, it is also historical. It was first heard in a specific context, it meant something specific, and unless we know that and appreciate it, we have only received half the message.

A prime example of this is in the familiar story of the Prodigal Son. Parents know that we will all experience a moment when a child breaks our hearts – and we will find ways to forgive them. But the power of the story is lost on us when we focus on the “riotous living” of the youngest son and neglect the broader meaning of the story.

I know you’ve probably heard this before, but it’s important to remind ourselves: the youngest son is a disgrace. He basically goes to his father and says, “I wish you were dead so I could have my inheritance.” In a culture where a father was literally the law and had the right (in theory if not in practice) to kill a rebellious son, let alone disown him, this father figures out what the younger son’s portion would be and gives it to him. No argument. No reminder of whose money it is and who’s in charge. And it probably involves land, which the son sells to finance his future life.

This was scandalous. Land was sacred to the Israelites. It was the Promised Land, a gift from God. It was restored to them after the Exile, again as a divine gift. The Old Testament has regulations for preserving the land, for keeping it in the family if it needs to be sold, for restoring it, redeeming it, if for some reason it has to leave the family. You might sell land as a last resort, but this is not a necessity. He is selling it to go have some fun. It’s blasphemous. It’s inconceivable.

He goes off to a far country – that means among Gentiles. And he’s working and living with pigs. (Have you ever been down-wind from a pig farm on a warm day? It is NOT pleasant!). This job isn’t just nasty, it’s unclean. It makes him unfit to stand among the people of Israel. Through his deliberate disregard of everything the Hebrew people held good, sacred, and worthy, he has lost his right to any consideration by his family; no, he hasn’t lost it, he’s given it away.

Then, he remembered who he was. The RSV says, “He came to himself.” And he says, “Geeze, even the hired day laborers on my father’s farm have enough food to keep body and soul together and a little more. I might as well suck it up. I’ll go home and say, ‘Father, I’ve insulted you and I’m not worthy to be part of the family, but won’t you please give me a job as a day worker?’”

Now, the father ought to have written him off. After all, he was only the younger son. And he had grossly insulted him. But apparently the father has either been sending out scouts, or going out and waiting for the son, looking for him. Fathers did not go out

for children, children came to them. And this father not only *goes* out, he *runs* out, completely abandoning any pretense of dignity.

Even if there were strong ties of affection, the father *might* have taken him back after an abject apology and strict guidelines about new behavior and tight boundaries of what he could do and have. But before the son can embarrass himself and say something self-abasing the father stops him. He calls for the best robe, a fine ring, and for the fattest calf to be cooked in celebration of his son's return.

Now, at this point, I can see Jesus' listeners' jaws dropping lower and lower and lower. No self-respecting parent acts this way! It's unheard of! It's disgraceful! How can you have any kind of civilized society if people act this way? But Jesus isn't done.

The oldest son is out in the fields and he hears a party going on. When he finds out the cause, he's made and refuses to go in. He says, "I've slaved for you all these years and you never even gave me a chicken for my friends! But this son of yours goes off and spends your money on God only knows what and you welcome him back with the best piece of meat in the place?"

He, too has insulted the father, refusing to go in, chastising the father for his behavior. But again, the father sacrifices his dignity. He doesn't correct him, he pleads with him (Fathers do NOT plead with sons!). He says, "You don't understand. This is not a reward for your brother. This is my celebration, my joy that my child is restored to me." The implication is that if the eldest son returns, the same joy will be extended for him.

Jesus gives us a lost sheep, a lost coin, and lost sons. And he wants the scribes and the Pharisees and us to understand God's extravagant, scandalous celebration when his children are reconciled, restored to him. This is what grace means – it's not about what we do. It's about who God is and what God does for us. We Baptists find great meaning in our celebration of adult baptism. But in traditions where they baptize infants it is a sign that salvation comes to us without our efforts, simply because God loves us. After all, what can a baby do to earn salvation?

Even today this idea of grace is scandalous. We can't quite wrap our minds around it. God loves Osama Bin Laden as much as God loves Billy Graham. Think about that. Let it work on your heart and mind. God loves each of us with an undeserved, extravagant love simply because we *are* and celebrates beyond all reasonable expectation when we embrace that relationship and live as though we believe it, treating others the way God loves them. This is the truth of the world, the reality of life.

Most of us, when we read or hear the story of the Prodigal Son make the equation that God is the Father and we are the forgiven younger son, though, if we are honest, many more of us may recognize ourselves as being more like the oldest brother. We are "good" people who can't really understand how or why God would forgive or welcome those awful people who have *not* obeyed' God's ways. Why doesn't God just smite those

sinners and be done with it? But I think that Jesus is inviting the Pharisees and the scribes and us to more – he’s inviting us to be like the extravagant father.

Paul tells the Corinthians we have this ministry of reconciliation – and he’s not using the royal “we” he means all of us, all Christians. WE have this ministry of reconciliation. Now we in the church have tended to establish rules about who’s in and who’s out, who’s truly welcome,, who do we insist must clean up their act, toe the line, take the appropriate steps before we allow them to be part of us. But Paul tells us that once we understand that God sent Jesus not as a teacher or a role model, but in a unique way to save the *whole world*, we can’t look at anybody else and judge them by the standard of where they came from or their politics, their gender, their education, or their bank balance. We even have to be careful about maintaining the Church as a “this is the way we do things” organization and to be open to letting God do a new thing in our midst, through new people who come among us or by working in new ways in people we’ve known forever. “What’s gotten into him?” Maybe it’s the Holy Spirit!

We need to look at each other through what Casey Thompson calls “a God-drenched point of view.”¹ We become ambassadors for Christ “authorized agents”² of the God who spoke creation into being and who wills the wholeness and holiness of each and every human being. One of the images of the church we talked about at our fall retreat was the church as an embassy – if you are at an embassy in Washington D.C. or around the U.N. in New York City or at a consulate somewhere in San Francisco or Chicago, you are on foreign soil, in a place where the laws and cultural values of that country are enforced and lived. An embassy is an outpost of that other place. So if you are in the embassy for Bahrain, you follow the laws of Bahrain, even if you are actually in Washington or London or Buenos Aires.

The church is meant to be God’s outpost, the place where God’s values, will and way are the final word. We don’t live by the rules of Warren Buffet or Rick Warren – we live by the law of love revealed in Jesus Christ, which sees us as whole, complete, loveable, beloved children of God. So we don’t have to “build community” on our own – we *discover* the community which God has created for us, a community for which God created us, as we cherish the people God cherishes, acting *for each other* as God acts for us.³

This is where the discipline of Lent kicks in – we need to keep putting on “Christ tinted glasses.” Dick G. Lange says, “It is too easy to say we love God and go about our daily business as if nothing had changed.”⁴ It is not about staking our claims or protecting our rights or judging another’s fitness to be one of God’s people. Our job – our only job – is to follow Jesus, loving the most unlikely and least worthy, because

¹ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, p.112.

² Mark E. Hopper, *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³ This idea and that of the paragraph which follows based on Duck G. Lange, *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

that's what God has done for us. And when we do that, it changes *everything*. And God throws a party.