

Sunday March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Lent IV

Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

“How Big is Your Family?”

One day a father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poorer and less fortunate people can be. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of what would be considered a very poor family. On their return from their trip, the father asked his son, ‘How did you enjoy our trip to the country?’ It was great, Dad’ he replied.

‘Did you see how poor and less fortunate people can be?’ The father asked. ‘Oh Yes,’ said the son. ‘So, what did you learn from our trip?’ Asked the father. The son answered . . . ‘I saw that we have one dog, and they had four. We have a pool that reaches the middle of our garden, and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lights in our garden, and they have stars at night. Our patio reaches the front yard, and they have the whole horizon.

We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them.’ With this the boy’s father was speechless and then his son added, ‘Thanks Dad for showing me how poor and less fortunate we are.”

If there is any one thing that hampers full and true communication between people, it is perspective. Frankly, sometimes I think it is amazing we can communicate at all. I know, for example, that despite my best effort to communicate clearly today, all of you will walk away with a different take on what I said. Your perspective will have altered or coloured what I say. Your own experience, theology, goals in life: will all impact on what I say.

I am not unsettled by this, because I know the Holy Spirit works in our hearts through our perspective, to see the truth we need to see. There is nothing wrong with a different perspective if we recognize it is there, and that our own perspective may not be the correct version of reality. And we need to grasp the truth that most of our conflicts, if not all of them, come from a differing of perspective.

Our Gospel lesson today is perhaps a more familiar one to all of us. The Prodigal Son parable has been referred to, at least in my experience, since I was in Sunday School. I particularly remember the flannel graph pictures of the prodigal son sitting in a pig pen. What I know now, and have experienced for many years, is that Jesus is a brilliant teacher. His parables have so many layers at times, and they cut through the garbage we like to hold onto.

Today’s parable was prompted by what transpired in Luke 15:1-2. Jesus had been welcoming tax collectors and other “sinners” to come near to him and listen to him. The Pharisees and scribes (the religious elites) saw this repeatedly happening, and they grumbled. “This fellow welcomes sinner and eats with them.” Jesus then gives three parables: The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and finally the Prodigal Son, or as I prefer to call it the parable of the Lost Son.

All three parables are about perspective. About how to understand what Jesus is doing.

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Namely, why is he welcoming “prodigal sons and daughters”. In a world of competing perspectives about who deserves God’s love and grace, whose perspective matters? Thus, the parable of the Prodigal Son. In this parable both brothers have their own perspective about their father, and both brothers are thoroughly wrong. They know their father, they grew up in his household, they worked for him; but they do not know him.

You know the younger brother’s story, how he asks for his share of the inheritance (essentially wishing his dad was dead) and he runs off to squander it in a far-off land. Soon, he finds himself penniless and starving amidst a severe famine. He ends up feeding pigs and eating what they eat, a little added drama to underscore how far a kosher raised boy had fallen. With no options left, the bible says he came to his senses and decided to return to his father.

He knew he deserved nothing, but he thought that at least he could work as a servant for his father and at least get some food. He planned to confess and repent for what he had done. His perspective was that that was the best he could ever hope for. He didn’t even deserve that level of mercy, after what he had done. But surprise! Jesus wanted this to be a surprise, a twist in the story. While the younger son was still far away off, the father saw him coming. The intent here is that the father has been watching for him.

The younger son gets a great big bear hug from dad, and even still the son blurts out his long-rehearsed speech. “I am not worthy to be called your son”. It is almost as if the father does not hear him. He calls to his servants, “Get him the very best robe, a ring for his finger, sandals on his feet.” All signs of sonship; of belonging to the family. Then “kill the fatted calf”. The special one the father had been saving for just such an event.

The younger son was stunned, maybe the servants too. His perspective of his father was all wrong. He thought his father would be angry, vengeful, unwelcoming, but a fatted calf? Somehow the younger son had failed to see the father as gracious, forgiving, desiring his son to come home. Jesus’ audience that day would have been floored by what they heard. They could not imagine any father doing what this one did. The boy should have been flogged or at least rejected at the door.

The younger son is left with a choice, as are Jesus’ listeners. Whose perspective are they going to trust? The younger son who says he is not worthy or the father’s, who celebrates his return? So, there are two perspectives here to choose from: the younger son’s and the father’s view. The elder son, oh, we haven’t forgotten him, he must make a choice of perspectives as well. He too has a perspective of his father, and it is not at all flattering.

“All these years, I’ve been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never even given me a goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours (Notice he can’t use his name or call him brother) came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him.” Can you hear the venom in his words? What perspective does he hold of his father?

Clearly from what he says, he saw his father as a heavy task master. Not the picture the rest of the parable paints.

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The elder son sees his father as severe, stingy, (a goat doesn't make much of a party) not approachable, and reckless as it comes to his brother, or at worse, naïve. If this happened today, we might worry about elder abuse. Doesn't dad know what he, the one who shall not be named, has done. I always find it interesting that if the younger brother was in a far-off land, how did the elder brother know what he was doing? He just assumes he's been with prostitutes.

The father does not lash out, again a surprising turn; he simply and calmly says, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. And then he tells him that they had to celebrate. This son who was lost is now found. Completely different perspective than the elder son. The elder son was not a slave, he is a son. He didn't need to slave away to earn what was already his. The father wasn't cheap with him. He could have whatever he wanted whenever he wanted.

Not here is the heart of the matter, I think. The father is not being unfair. I say this because we seemed determined to think things; especially with God, need to be fair. The father never, ever, set out to be fair with either son. Hear that again. Fairness is never part of the equation. Grace and generosity by their definition are never fair. The father sees the younger brother's return as a great opportunity to show unfairness. That's the whole point.

In this parable, people get what they do not deserve. The father even reframes the elder brother's story according to the perspective of grace. So, like the younger brother, whose perspective is the elder brother going to believe? His own, or the father's. Who will he trust? Now here is another angle to this story; another perspective to keep with our theme. It is something Rob Bell unpacks nicely in his book Love Wins.

The difference between what the brothers see, and the father sees, can also be framed as the difference between heaven and hell. For most of the history of the church, Heaven was pictured as being up there and hell as being down there. In other words, they were pictured as geographical places separating people. One up there and the other down there. How about thinking about these things differently, in terms of this parable?

In the parable, Jesus places the elder brother right outside the party. He can hear what is going on, smell the roasted calf, hear the tinkling of glasses and the laughter of the celebration. The elder brother refuses to accept the father's perspective and enters the party. The elder brother refuses to enter heaven, because his prodigal brother is in there. He would rather dwell in his own hell, his false perspective about the father and about his brother and about the party.

Rob Bell suggests that Heaven and Hell are not just in the future, but they are here now, bumping into each other. We are constantly being asked to choose where we reside. Some, like the younger brothers, are haunted by the past. Crushed by regret, sin, abuse, neglect-ugly stuff that we have buried for years. These are the people who say that if they came to church the roof would cave in, or they might get struck by lightning.

Others get caught up in their egos. They think God in Christ is for weak souls. They think they are strong enough to stand on their own. They concur with Karl Marx who said, "religion is the opiate of the masses". By refusing God's story, we choose to reside in hell.

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We can believe in all kinds of stuff about ourselves. We can create quite elaborate versions of our story that is completely different from God's. The Gospel confronts our perspective. It is brutally honest. It offers us a liberating story. A story the younger brother experienced firsthand, and the elder brother refused to accept. God's story is so wonderful, so gracious that perhaps that is why we refuse to accept it.

We think it is a delusion, and so we would rather wallow with the pigs, or keep our own twisted views of what God is like. Our view of God is sometimes so distorted, and we get trapped into thinking our perspective is the only one that matters. The ramifications of this parable are earth shattering, no they are universe shattering. It calls us to reflect on our perspectives about ourselves, and about others and certainly about God.

This is what the Pharisees and scribes got so up in arms about. They had come to believe that their perspective was the only one that mattered. They ended up being the ones outside the door, within earshot of the party, grumbling about the unworthiness of those the father welcomed in recognized as a son, an heir. Both brothers thought they understood their dad, but they were both way off base. And furthermore, the elder brothers saw their younger tax collector brothers not through the father's eyes, but through their own twisted perspective.

To turn from God's grace, his forgiveness, his welcome is to relegate yourself to a hellish existence. To deny those same things to someone else is to condemn them to a hellish life. Imagine all those who we encounter, who feel unworthy of God's love. Perhaps they go through a little mantra in their minds, preparing to somehow talk God into some small mercy. Maybe if I repent God will let me be a servant, on the fringe. Maybe he will even ease my pain.

But we still don't get it. Jesus said from the cross, "It is finished". When it is finished, why do we keep striving, trying to gain entrance when the door is wide open. Do you know what is one of the hardest places on the planet to gain access to? It is the oval office in the White house. To gain access to that office you must have an appointment about some monumental matter. No one can just wander in off the street and walk into that office.

There was however one beautiful exception to this rule. When JFK was president, photographers sometimes captured a heartwarming moment. Amid a busy day, handling things like the Cuban Missile Crisis, a toddler, namely the President's son John-John would wander into the oval office with nary a thought of asking permission. He would often climb up on that huge presidential desk, interacting with the president and whoever else happened to be there.

John-John wasn't there to solve world problems; he simply wanted to see his dad. Jesus is telling us in this parable that God is just as approachable. There is no tricky protocol, nor do you need to have your life all put together. No matter what your past is, what baggage you carry, who you think you are or who others think you are, you are welcome. You are a son or daughter. People may want to tell you different things, but they are lying to you.

You may think to yourself that the door is closed but you are lying to yourself. There is no need to be at the door trying to listen in or hoping for scraps of God's generosity. Instead, he has a big bear hug, a ring for your finger, a robe and sandals for your feet.

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So, don't tell me that you are not worthy, because of its garbage. Please don't infer that anyone else is unworthy in your opinion because that too is garbage. Stop listening to the grumblers, who complain when Jesus eats with tax collectors and other sinners. Stop choosing to stay in hell, whatever that looks like for you, and embrace your entry to heaven, the party.

In most church circles people love to talk about "getting right with God". Often it is used an evangelistic call to clean yourself up, and become like those already in the family, namely the elder brothers and sisters. I think we are already right with God, thanks to the events of Calvary. "It is finished". What needs to be right, and what Jesus is talking about in this parable, is our perspective of God, ourselves, and others.

For this God welcomes and eats with sinners. And thank God, because that includes us all.