

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

March 14, 2010
4th Sunday in Lent
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Practicing Loving Forgiveness

Last year right before we entered the holiday season, we offered a 2-week adult Sunday School class that was called, “Ask a Rabbi.” Rabbi Ed Stafman from Temple Beth Shalom here in Bozeman was here to field the questions that were presented to him about Judaism today and its relationship to Christianity and other world religions. Rabbi Ed made it clear the first week that he was open to absolutely any question that might be asked of him. He said that there was no question that would offend him. And indeed there was a gracious humility about his answers that made it very easy to talk with him and learn more from him. In one of the very first questions asked of him, he sought to make clear one of the very fundamental differences between Christianity and Judaism. He said that Jews are a bound together around a common peoplehood, while Christians are bound together by common belief and a set of doctrines. To be a Jew is to be bound to other Jews through a shared identity. To be a Christian is to be bound to other Christians through a shared faith or set of beliefs. To be clear these identifying characteristics are not exclusive, so it doesn’t mean that Jews don’t have an important set of beliefs through which they understand the world; and it doesn’t mean that Christians don’t have a sense of connection to one another that goes beyond agreement and consensus. However, Rabbi Ed made this point as a way of explaining why Christians can get hung up when they try to understand Judaism by looking at it and evaluating it exclusively through the lens of belief. And of course when it is the Jews trying to understand Christianity, they can also get tripped up if they evaluate it exclusively through the lens of shared experience and identity. In almost all of the other responses that he had to the questions that were posed for the two weeks he was with us, understanding this fundamental contrast was foundational to what he had to say on a wide variety of topics.

I was reminded of these conversations in our Ask a Rabbi class when I was pondering the reading from Luke’s gospel this week, most traditionally known as the parable of the prodigal son. Because while this parable speaks us to us as Christians since it is in the Christian Bible, according to Luke it was told by Jesus in response to some grumbling by the Jewish scribes and Pharisees. This packed-with-meaning parable speaks its nuanced truths slightly differently depending upon the perspective from which it is encountered.

This parable is one of three that Jesus tells in response to the Jewish leaders’ grumbling about Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them. All three of the parables are on the theme of the lost and the found—the first two very short, one about a lost sheep and the other about a lost coin. While these brief little parables make clear the extent to which God seeks out the lost, it is this third parable that gives more attention to the lost that God is seeking. If you were reading along in the pew Bibles, you may have noticed that the New Revised Standard Version entitles this parable as “The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother.” For indeed it would not pack as much of a parable-punch if it were only about a father and one son. It’s the contrast between the two sons of this father that makes this story so rich in meaning.

While this storyline may be quite familiar to some, I’d like to take a closer look to fully appreciate its depth. Since this story is told by Jesus to the Jewish scribes and Pharisees, it is properly understood then as a story within a Jewish framework. So right off

the fact that the mere request of the younger son that he receive his portion of his inheritance right now is scandalous. It is not only disrespectful for a son to make this request of his living father, it is shameful for in essence the boy is saying that his father is as good as dead since that is when the inheritance is passed on. And then to add insult to injury, once the father grants his younger son's request, the son sells the property and converts it and all the other assets into cash, thereby turning his back on the Jewish connection to the land and possessions that were all understood to be gifts from God to God's people. So not only does he disown his own father, he disavows his Jewish identity by selling it all for cash to support what is described as dissolute living. Jesus' listeners would have been absolutely appalled at this younger son for the complete turning away from his family, his faith and his God. So although perhaps it would have been offensive, it may have not been surprising that in the next stage of this younger son's journey he finds himself penniless, homeless and hungry, working as a swineherd. Remember, pigs were considered unclean animals, meaning that a faithful Jew would have nothing to do with them. So that the younger son resorts to such desperation where he is in regular contact with pigs and is even tempted to eat the food of these unclean animals is further evidence of his complete contempt for his Jewish heritage. It's at this juncture that the story takes a turn when the younger son in his desperation decides to return to his father, confess his sinfulness and ask that he be placed among his father's hired hands. He knew that he had squandered not only his money but his right to be a son of his own father.

Jesus could not have been clearer in defining the "lost" in a most dramatic way. It wasn't heresy or weak faith or failure to believe correctly that put the younger son outside of the Jewish community, it was his rejection of his Jewish identity that did it. This is what would have been stunningly outrageous to the scribes and Pharisees listening to Jesus.

So if the first part of the parable is set up to make it clear just how far lost and gone the younger son is, it's this next part of the parable that goes the distance to demonstrate the incredible unwavering love that the father had for his younger son through it all—a love that looks past a complete rejection on the part of the son. So even before the son sees his father and he can go through with his plan to confess his failings, the father who has been on the lookout for the son, spots him and runs to the son to embrace him with complete compassion. Jesus' Jewish listeners would have been struck by the father's forsaking his fatherly role by running, something unheard of for someone of the older and respected generation. This full acceptance of the prodigal son by his father would have stretched them to the breaking point, for this unconditional acceptance and forgiveness is beyond amazement.

This outrage is of course expressed in the last part of this parable when the older son is infuriated by his father's loving embrace of his son that is then followed by a lavish party in which the father welcomes his lost son back into the Jewish community through a banquet complete with the fatted calf. In spite of the father's pleading with his older son to also embrace this return of his younger son, we're left wondering whether the older son was eventually inspired by his father's generosity or embittered by it.

The unconditional love and acceptance that is the centerpiece of this story is also unnerving to our own sensibilities today of right and wrong, and how our actions and choices have predictable consequences. Michael Lindvall is a Presbyterian pastor who has written the curriculum that we're using in our mid-week Lenten study called "Pausing on

the Road to Jerusalem.” In writing about this parable and how it challenges our perspective of those who can identify with the older son he has written an alternative version of this parable that he calls the Parable of the Faithful Son. He dedicates it to all the hard-working and dependable older brothers in history. The first part of the parable is the same up through the point where the younger son decides to come back home on his knees.

While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him through the window of the house. But he remained seated at his writing table until his son was brought into him. Remaining seated, he greeted his son with grim countenance, crossing his arms before his breast. And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” And the father said to his servants, “Quickly take him into the fields, and there he shall toil side by side with his faithful brother for forty days (at least) until he proves himself worthy to be a son of mine.”

And after forty days, the elder brother came and drew near to the house, and his father ran and embraced him and kissed him. The elder brother said to his father, “This younger son of yours has grown somewhat in spirit during these forty days of hard labor in the fields.” And his father said to his older son, “Son, if you think your younger brother is truly repentant, I would desire to put the best robes on you both, and shoes on your feet, and rings on your hands. My son, let us bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us all make merry, for you have been so faithful, and your younger brother who was dead is alive and who was lost is found.” And the older son said, “Let me ponder the matter of such a banquet, father. Perhaps after another forty days it would be fitting to kill the fatted calf for us.” (Michael A. Lindvall, *Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem*, Session 4, © 2007 www.TheThoughtful-Christian.com)

While we might find this alternative writing of this parable to be amusing since we know the original so well, if we’re honest, isn’t it a bit more to our liking for those of us who have striven and continue to strive to live as faithful sons and daughters of our father in heaven? But then again, the parable that is really all about the amazing forgiving grace of God loses its effectiveness if that grace is somehow tied to our own righteousness or our own sense of entitlement.

In this Lenten season we’re focusing on the practices that we find demonstrated by Jesus as he made his way to Jerusalem and all that awaited him there. These practices are suggested not as those things we can do to earn God’s favor, acceptance and grace. Rather they are practices that help us to maintain our focus on the very grace of God that is showered upon us daily. When we catch a glimpse of that grace extended to the prodigal son, it can open us to discover that it is the very same unconditional love and acceptance and grace that has been offered us over and over and over again. Our own practicing of loving forgiveness as we go through our lives will strengthen our own awareness of the loving forgiveness we have received.

When we ponder this amazing grace, it becomes a part of who we are as people of Christian faith. So while it can be rightly said that Christians are those bound together by a common belief, central to that common belief is affirmation of God’s great love and grace that are so amazing.