



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida  
4 Lent - Year C (RCL) - March 13/14, 2010  
**2 Corinthians 5:16-21 ; Ps. 32; Luke 15:1-3,11b - 32**  
Preacher: The Reverend Canon William H. Stokes, *Rector*

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.... (2 Cor. 5:18)*

We had a lively discussion about confession in our Tuesday morning Bible Study this past week. The Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer has two forms of Reconciliation of a Penitent, our form of confession. You can find them beginning on page 446. In the Episcopal Church confession to a priest is not required of anyone. We believe, that for most people, personal confession to God in the privacy of one's own prayer is sufficient. The rule of thumb for use of the Rite of Reconciliation in the Episcopal Church is that "all may, some should, none must." I think that's a pretty good rule.

The rubrics, or instructions, concerning reconciliation state, "The ministry of reconciliation, which has been committed by Christ to his Church, is exercised through the care each Christian has for others, through the common prayer of Christians assembled for public worship, and through the priesthood of the Church and its ministers declaring absolution" (p. 446).

That the Rite is placed immediately before the section of the Prayer Book titled "Ministry to the Sick" is telling. Confession and absolution are to be understood as pastoral acts, as expressions of Christian caring and healing. When our consciences are troubled, we are sick. Some people's consciences are so troubled they require the help of another, a "baggage handler." That's where the priest and the Rite of Reconciliation come in.

The Rite of Reconciliation is about God's grace, God's longing to forgive us and make us whole. In fact, that is the primary thrust of this confessional season of Lent in the church as well. It is about God's longing to forgive us and make us whole so that we can live in newness of life and in the power of Christ's resurrection. Lent is not intended to mire us in sin and leave us there, self-absorbed and self-loathing. It's to cast the sin off of us, to put it behind us such that it is no longer an obstacle in our relationships with one another or with God, or even with our own selves. It is to assure us that God created us good, and loves us, and wants us to thrive and live life to the fullest, which includes performing service in God's name. The emphasis of Lent is not to be on God's wrath, anger and judgment; it's on God's mercy, love and forgiveness.

Moreover, this message, this Gospel, Good News message of God's mercy, love and forgiveness is one we are called to share with others, many of whom need desperately to hear it as they live lives of waste, wandering and alienation, much like the younger son in the famous parable from Luke that was today's Gospel reading, a parable we all know so well...*There was a*

*man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his Father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me...' (Luke 15:11 -12).*

New Testament scholar, Kenneth E. Bailey offers some critical insights into this story.<sup>1</sup> Bailey emphasizes that this story is being told in the Middle East and that understanding this Middle Eastern context is essential if we are to grasp the full significance of the parable. As Bailey observes, "The younger son requests his inheritance while his father is still alive and in good health. In traditional Middle Eastern culture, this means, 'Father, I am eager for you to die!' If the father is a traditional Middle Eastern father, he will strike the boy across the face and drive him out of the house. Surely anywhere in the world this is an outrageous request. The Prodigal is not simply a young boy who is 'off to the big city to make his fame and fortune.' Rather, this young son makes a request that is unthinkable, particularly in Middle Eastern culture."<sup>2</sup>

The outrageousness of the story doesn't end there. Bailey tells us, "the Prodigal "gathered all he had..." "He is selling his part of the family farm. As that happens, this horrendous family breakdown becomes public knowledge, and the family is shamed before the entire community. Jewish law of the first century provided for the division of an inheritance (when the father was ready to make such a division), but did not grant the children the right to sell until after the father's death."<sup>3</sup>

And it rings true, this story....At least it rings true for lots of us....Youth, naiveté and ambition set out without a lot of concern for his father, his mother, if she is still alive, his elder brother, or the families reputation in the wider community. Bad decisions converge with poor timing. He squanders his inheritance and there was a famine in the land. There is nothing left but for him to do but feed the pigs....

Luke tells us, "*He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything*" (Luke 15:16). Remember, Jesus is telling this parable in a cultural context in which any contact with pigs was repugnant, and anathema. This younger son has sunk as low as one can sink. He is alone, alone and isolated and he is thinking, desperately trying to figure all of this out.

The younger son also faces a serious dilemma....Again, Kenneth Bailey is helpful. He tells us that "From the Jerusalem Talmud it is known that the Jews of the time of Jesus had a method of punishing any Jewish boy who lost the family inheritance to Gentiles. It was called the 'qetsatsah ceremony.' The ceremony was simple. The villagers would bring a large earthenware jar, fill it with burned nuts and burned corn, and break it in front of the guilty individual. While doing this, the community would shout, 'So-and-so is cut off from his people.' From that point on, the village would have nothing to do with the wayward lad."<sup>4</sup> When he left town, the Prodigal knew he could not lose the family money among the Gentiles. He has lost it, and now he is working for Gentile pig-farmers. This boy is in serious trouble.

Then something happens....The text says "*he came to himself*" (Luke 15: 17). I love that verse. I like to think it means he really came to a full recognition of himself and how far he had fallen for the first time. There are those who think it doesn't mean this all. They see this young son as just scheming some more and plotting on how he can manipulate and work this situation in such a way that he won't have to face the Qetsatsah. Take your pick...It doesn't much matter. This story is much more about the Father than it is about the younger son.

The younger son thinks to himself, "*How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called you son; treat me like one of your hired hands'*" He set off and went to see his father. But

*while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him (Luke 15:17-20).*

I wonder how often the father stood out there looking, interrupted in his work, interrupted in his chores, waiting for that moment, waiting to see the familiar silhouette of his younger son coming across the horizon, longing for him to come....The anguish of a loving parent for a wandering child is often deep, almost unbearable....

Bailey notes, “The father realizes full well how his son will be welcomed in the village when he returns in failure. Thus, the father also prepares a plan: to reach the boy before the boy reaches the village. The father knows that if he is able to achieve reconciliation with his son in public, no one in the village will treat the Prodigal badly. No one will dare suggest that the *qetsatsah* ceremony must be enacted.”<sup>5</sup>

As he trekked across the land on the journey home, I imagine that the younger son had played the scene over and over in his head....I imagine he had rehearsed the lines he would say to his father with each step he took; working at the inflection, working so he would get it just right; so he would sound appropriately contrite, *‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called you son; treat me like one of your hired hands’*” (Luke 15:18 – 19).

Bailey again, “for the third time, the father breaks the mold of Middle Eastern patriarchy. He takes the bottom edge of his long robes in his hand and runs to welcome his pig-herding son. He falls on his neck and kisses him before hearing his prepared speech! The father does not demonstrate love in response to his son's confession. Rather, out of his own compassion he empties himself, assumes the form of a servant, and runs to reconcile his estranged son...Traditional Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, do not run in public. To do so is deeply humiliating.”<sup>6</sup>

Nothing could have prepared that younger son for the depth of the father's compassion....Nothing could have prepared him for the warmth of the father's embrace or his father's generosity in calling out to the slaves, *“Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found”* (Luke 15:22 – 24).

Now here, it is important to recall, once again, that Jesus is telling a parable....This is not a story about a man and his two sons; it's about God and God's love and mercy and forgiveness....This parable was being told to an audience that had made an observation about Jesus....It was the observation that opened today's Gospel reading: *Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”* It's scandalous! Who does he think he is? (Luke 15:1 – 2).

In response to their grumbling Jesus tells three stories: of a shepherd who had one hundred sheep and lost one and went out and found it, and rejoiced when he found it and threw a party for all his friends (See Luke 15:3-7); of a woman who had ten coins and lost one. She lit a lamp and swept the house and found the coin, and when she found it, she called all her friends and said “Rejoice with me” (See Luke 15:8 – 10). *“Just so,”* Jesus says to the grumblers, *“there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”* (Luke 15:10). God is like that, Jesus is saying to them. God's joy over one sinner who repents is just like that of the shepherd....It's just like that of the woman. God's joy and God's love are just like that of the Father for that prodigal son who comes to himself and returns....

But lest we forget, there is a second son, a second son who at the end of the story is not happy. He is grumbling and angry. In fact, he appears to mirror those Pharisees and scribes to whom Jesus is speaking when he tells the story. Like the older son, they are the faithful ones, the ones who day and day out try to do what's right, who try to be dutiful, who try to conform to the Father's will. And I'm guessing that there's some sympathy among us for that elder son, and even for these Pharisees and scribes.

Toward the end of our Tuesday morning Bible study, there emerged an understanding of the story that seemed right to me; that seemed true both to experience and to the Gospel. One of the participants observed that, in most families, the child who needs it the most, even the one who is sickest, garners an unequal portion of the parent's attention. Needless to say, this often breeds anger, resentment, grumbling and even, sometimes, hatred and estrangement among siblings. How human this is; how human and how sad.

At the end of today's parable, the elder son is bitter and hurt, and this is, perhaps, understandable for a host of reasons. He refused to join the party. As he had done with the younger son, the Father goes to the elder son in love and pleads with him. But the son will have nothing to do with it.

In a brilliant sermon on this text, Episcopal priest, teacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The father makes this case to his good son, who is as pig-headed as his bad son, but it is not clear that this child buys his argument. It feels good to stand in the yard, after all, even when that dishonors the family and divides the village. It feels good to know who's right, who's wrong, and which one you are, even when that shames your father and breaks his heart, causing him to die a little right before your eyes. Meanwhile, there is a banquet going on. You can hear the music and the dancing even out in the yard, and there is plenty left to eat. Your father won't make you go in the house. He'll just stand in the yard with you to protect you, the same way he protected his brother. What's left of his honor is in your hands. You can go to the party as you are, as long as you don't insist on staying that way. The father's banquet is for the reconcilable, thrown for anyone who will come."<sup>7</sup>

With whom do you identify most strongly in the story? The younger son? The older son? Perhaps you are a parent in the midst of sibling rivalries and find yourself identifying with the Father? How do you respond?

*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; see everything has become new*, it says in today's reading from Second Corinthians. *All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.* (2 Cor. 5:17 – 18).

That's the power of forgiveness....God's forgiveness of us, our forgiveness of one another.....It is the power to make all things new, to make the whole creation new....If you've ever experienced it, ever experienced genuine forgiveness, you know this....It is the most powerful act of love there is, save the act of giving one's life for another....which Christ did, in order to draw us to reconciliation with God, to reconciliation with one another.

And we, we all, each one us; we are ambassadors for Christ today, this Lent, indeed throughout our Christian journeys, in that God makes his appeal through us, his appeal of outrageous love, his appeal of outrageous forgiveness, like the outrageous love, the outrageous forgiveness, of the father in today's parable.

Therefore with St. Paul, on this Fourth Sunday in Lent, more than half way through our season of penitence and fasting, I entreat you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God, be reconciled to one another (2 Cor. 5:20). Let go of whatever obstructions there are in your life, let go of your anger and your frustrations, your resentments, quarrels and jealousies....Come into

the banquet....Join the celebration....Our Father, our heavenly Father is looking for you, waiting to greet you with joy, to clothe you in a robe, the best one in the house!

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey, Kenneth M. "The Pursuing Father: What we need to know about this misunderstood Middle Eastern parable" Original copyright 1998 by the author and/or *Christianity Today Magazine* used with permission from John Mark Ministries. Go to <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/2367.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Bailey

<sup>3</sup> Bailey

<sup>4</sup> Bailey

<sup>5</sup> Bailey

<sup>6</sup> Bailey

<sup>7</sup> Brown Taylor, Barbara "The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family" from her Website/Newsletter entry of April 17, 2006 -Go to <http://www.barbarabrowntaylor.com/newsletter374062.htm>