

## **PATHS OF DISCOVERY**

### **Lent 4 – Cycle C: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

There are two parables of Jesus that have caught the imagination of people of every faith and even of no faith, and are part of what we might call the popular canon: the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This morning, we hear for the only time in our three-year cycle of Sunday readings the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In many ways, the story is familiar and beloved. There is such depth to this story, though, that we are bound to notice things in it we haven't observed before. In fact, it is one of those pieces of literature to which we can return again and again and receive something new each time we read it.

This sermon is titled Paths of Discovery, and I wrote it thinking about how the Parable of the Prodigal Son might help interpret a labyrinth walk we might take in Roy Grosz Hall after the service or during office hours this week from Monday to Thursday. Di Williams, the author of *The Labyrinth*, writes that in the Christian tradition labyrinth walks are usually understood as a form of embodied prayer. For me, walking the labyrinth is exactly that: because it is a bounded space – I'm referring to the many pathways or courses – walking the labyrinth gives me time apart with my thoughts and feelings; and today and throughout this week, the Parable of the Prodigal Son may provide a reference point for those thoughts and feelings. It may give me more time with the story than I would normally allow it. And my labyrinth walk may be the walk of the prodigal toward that distant country, and then home again. And I must tell you that the directional aspect of walking the labyrinth has power for me. In many ways, stepping into the labyrinth is a walk away from what was; the walk itself becomes for me what is; the walk out is a walk toward what will be; and then, stepping out of the labyrinth places me back in the world I left, perhaps 20 minutes ago, in a different frame of mind, with new insights and a different perspective. The walk is an external journey that provides for an inner journey, and often that inner journey is transformational in character.

Certainly the path taken by the prodigal son himself was transformational: he left with the expectation of finding himself, being his own person in a new and different context. In the process of exploring the power his father's money gave him and experiencing complete freedom from the constraints of family, he learned how such things had a double value; that they were both good and bad at the same time. Jesus uses a phrase which indicates a turning point in the boy's movement, literally and figuratively, in the action of the story – he uses the phrase "...when he came to himself" to indicate that transformation had taken place; that the boy had walked into the heart of darkness (as Joseph Conrad put it in his novel of the same name) and was now able to find the strength to leave it and integrate his experience with whatever the new reality would be – probably working for his father as a hired hand. And so his return home is the walk out of the labyrinth, so to speak, but he was certainly not prepared for the welcome that awaited him at the entrance/his home.

Back in Luke, we see that this story addresses the immediate context: Jesus' concern for tax collectors and sinners. The parable shows us that, like the prodigal son, the tax collectors and sinners are not beyond the grace of God, as the scribes and Pharisees presume. Jesus' message in the story is that sincere repentance is answered by God with complete forgiveness, restoration, and renewal, the fruits of which are the conversion of the heart and the amendment of life. The scribes and Pharisees, the holy people, are the elder brother in the story; the tax collectors and sinners are the younger brother who, we see in the teaching and mentoring of Jesus, benefit at length from the grace of God.

As those who, through the ministry of law and gospel, become aware of our own sinful nature, we identify with the younger son and thereby make a connection with the tax collectors and sinners. We recognize our own need of the grace, mercy, and forgiveness from God that the younger son receives from his father. Through the parable, Jesus teaches that God is like the welcoming father.

Through the portrayal of the elder son in the parable, we can identify with the scribes and Pharisees. We are the church-goers, the ones who take some pride in being good and doing good. When Jesus levels the playing field on sin, both in the parable and then more authentically through the saving work of his life, death, and resurrection, we lose our edge in the imagined race for salvation. But the parable teaches us through the unease we feel with the elder son's negative reaction to the father's unconditional love that

self-righteousness is the condemnation of the so-called holy ones; that taking pride in our preferred status as good people is the sin that takes us to ground. And we find that we need the father's mercy and forgiveness/God's mercy and forgiveness as much as the younger son in the story/the tax collectors and sinners.

On a secondary level it is a story about relationships: parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends and friends, us and them. There are many things that can upset the apple cart in such relationships, and this story echoes some of the real-life situations we ourselves have experienced. Parents and children know first-hand about the rebellion that is part and parcel of individuation as children become adults. We know about the jealousy that the elder brother exhibits, and agree with him that the younger son is undeserving of his welcome home. Many times in life we feel an entitlement that is not given its due. A phrase such as "the undeserving poor" reveals that the elder brother's judgement is alive and well in our own society. We have no trouble in understanding the elder son's point of view when we pass judgement on others. We are familiar with those feelings.

As parents and as teachers, we also identify with the father in the story: the most effective tool we have as parents and teachers is the unconditional love that prompts us to affirm our children and students, rather than criticizing and finding fault. Everyone needs a little grace in their experience, and there is no better place to discover it than in the relationships that are primary – parent and child, teacher and student.

On yet a third level, the story mirrors our own journey through life. Luther would say that we travel the road the prodigal son takes each day; that we must daily die to sin and daily rise to newness of life; that in our relationships, or in our choices, or in our use of time, or in our negligence, or in how we use our gifts, and in our lack of concern for the well-being of others, there is always room for individual and corporate improvement. The message of forgiveness in this story, however, prevents us from becoming mired in guilt and immobilized. The grace of God, we see in the father's love for both the younger and older sons, is always available; always sufficient to allow us to begin again, try again, learn from our mistakes and move on. Other people may not forgive us for the wrongs we have done, but God forgives us.

And it is here that there is a re-connection with how walking the labyrinth can be an aid to the interior life. Di Williams suggests that we should ask ourselves the question "What do I seek?" every time we begin a labyrinth walk. We should prepare ourselves, in other words, for the walk; because it is in prayer and time apart that we have the opportunity for clarity and understanding; that we catch the inspiration and have the flashes of insight that can solve problems; that can reset our world; that find our story within God's larger story of redemption and release; that we can discover ourselves in the extravagance of God's love and grace; that we can see every path as a path of discovery.