

Lost and Found

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010.

But we had to celebrate and rejoice; for this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found. Luke 15:32

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, there is a tendency to identify with the older brother. He is the one who stays home and does what is expected of him with no recognition for his conscientiousness. If you are a dutiful and responsible type, you may identify with him. I did.

Often there are families with children who are expected to be responsible with their spending money. They save up their earnings from summer jobs while one of them is careful in spending while the other spends it all in a few months. That one may receive more while the other continues to manage his earnings responsibly. In time, more is expected of the one who is wise in spending than the one who is not. It is an odd value system whereby the less responsible one, often referred to as "Poor Mary" or "Poor John" usually gets bailed out.

In this teaching story the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance and spends it in dissolute living or, in the King James Version, "wasted his substance with riotous living." In his shortsightedness, he thinks he can get away with it when in reality, he isn't thinking at all.

When the prodigal son has gone through all his money he finds himself reduced to feeding the pigs and eating their leftovers. Then, the scripture tells us, he "came to himself." If we have gone off down the wrong path, there comes a time when we come to ourselves as reality sets in and we awaken to what is going on and where we are headed. For this young man it is a moment of awakening to reality for the first time in his life. He realizes that he has blown it and he hits the wall. He then does what he has to do because it is the only thing he can do. He decides to return home and admit to his father that he was wrong, that he has wasted his inheritance. He is willing to work as one of his father's hired hands. He is so desperate he is willing to feed the pigs and even share their food.

When the father sees his lost son returning, he doesn't wait, he goes out to meet him and welcome him back. He orders a banquet feast and invites everyone to welcome him home. Everyone rejoices in the return of the lost son, everyone, that is, except the older brother. He is livid when he thinks that his profligate brother is being rewarded for his irresponsibility and is so filled with resentment that he refuses to join in the celebration. He has stayed home and has faithfully fulfilled his duties, working hard and doing everything expected of him. And what does he get for it? Nothing! He is so incensed at his father's generosity that he is unable to refer to his brother by name, only, "this son of yours."

This teaching story is not about God rewarding people for irresponsibility. It is about forgiveness and reconciliation and welcoming back a repentant sinner. The younger son was prodigious in spending his inheritance and his father is prodigious in his forgiveness. He rejoices that his son recognizes his fault and is accepting responsibility for his actions. The older brother is so caught up in his own self-righteousness that he can't bring himself to share in the happiness over his brother's return. He doesn't understand that his father welcomes his repentant brother as God welcomes any repentant sinner.

What we learn from this teaching story is that when we go astray we have to take responsibility for our actions. When we do, there is rejoicing in God's realm. Just as the father

went out to greet his son on his arrival, God takes the initiative in unconditional love to reach out to us to bring us back in forgiveness and reconciliation. This is why God came to us in the person of Christ. This is why God welcomes us on our return with open arms.

The two brothers in this teaching story represent two types of people. The elder brother is the child of the law and the second is the child of grace. The elder brother is the compulsive achiever who lives by the rules and is quite righteous about it while the prodigal brother knows he has gone wrong and has the humility to admit it and is welcomed back. The elder brother can't understand because he never takes any risks or ventures out of his comfort zone.

I would hope that the elder brother eventually got the point and became reconciled to both his brother and his father. He has as much to learn about forgiveness as his younger brother has learned about personal responsibility. That is why I no longer identify with the whining elder brother. God's grace is not earned; it is a gift. It is not given as a reward for good behavior. Grace is a by product of forgiveness and reconciliation of those who have gone astray. God's grace is always undeserved and unearned. We must not resent or begrudge God's generosity and sense of justice.

The elder brother's attitude represents the tired old righteous attitude that operates on the merit system in which we expect reward for good behavior. The fact is that it is not up to us to know who is and who is not deserving of God's love. God owes us nothing; we owe God everything. In light of that, the elder brother is as much a prodigal as the younger one. Those who are most deserving of God's grace are those who are serious about their repentance. And those who accept their own forgiveness have no choice but to be forgiving of others. Like the father in this story, God is prodigious in giving and forgiving.

This teaching story is not about cheap grace, not about getting off the hook easily nor about being rewarded for irresponsibility. This is about being honest with our selves when we get into trouble as a result of making wrong choices. When we admit our mistakes and are willing to make amends it is an occasion for rejoicing. In God's system of justice, those who are least are first and those who think they deserve to be first are last. We must never resent God's grace, nor begrudge God's generosity. It is a gift we want as much for others as ourselves.