

Reflection: The Lost Children Fourth Sunday of Lent
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 March 14th, 2010

Some of you know that I'm doing what is called "Clinical Pastoral Education" alongside my internship at Dunbar Heights. This is training in spiritual and pastoral care in the secular and multi faith setting of the hospital. As part of this training, I am the on call chaplain for spiritual care emergencies at Vancouver General Hospital, about one weekend every two months.

The first time I received an emergency call, it was from the family of an elderly woman who was dying. When I got in to the unit, the woman was alone, no family to be seen. She was from England, but of Irish stock and recognized my Irish accent immediately. As she lay facing me, with tubes and IVs and electrodes keeping her alive, and monitoring her life signs, we talked and talked. She reached out her hands for mine, and the medical apparatus faded away as we connected on a deep level.

She told me pieces of her life story. She told me of the heartbreak she had experienced as her first, her only daughter and then her only granddaughter had alienated themselves from her. Her daughter had a history of mental illness, and alcoholism, and her granddaughter became addicted to heroin and other street drugs. She described the cycle of them pulling away, and then reaching out and drawing close again. All the time she spoke, I never detected any judgment in her voice—just pure love. She had always welcomed them back into her life whenever they returned.

She was rejoicing that her daughter and grand-daughter were close to her again, but they had not been communicating with each other, and today, at her bedside, was the first time they had seen each other in over a year. The woman who was dying wanted there to be reconciliation and healing, and saw that it was beginning to happen. We gave thanks for this and prayed together. I later met separately with the daughter and granddaughter, and then sat with the family as they cried, and laughed, and hugged each other. I was struck by the extravagance of the love and grace shown by this mother. Her heart had broken many times over her family. She could have built a wall around it to protect herself. But she chose love instead of recrimination.

The parable in today's reading is told to tax collectors and sinners who were coming near to listen to Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes who are grumbling about their presence. And so Jesus begins to tell one of his engaging and deceptively simple parables. The one we hear today immediately follows two that are also familiar: The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. In each of these preceding and parallel parables, something small is lost, and someone engages in an unusually extensive search for the item—the one sheep, the one coin. There is

great rejoicing when the item is found, and then Jesus states that there is great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. And this third parable in the series could be called the “lost son”, or as I prefer, “the lost brothers”, because each of them in a way is lost. The younger brother is lost by his leaving for a distant country and his scandalous squandering of his portion of the family farm; and the older brother is lost in his bitterness and self-righteousness at his brother and his father, and probably at himself.

We more commonly know this as the “parable of the prodigal son”. It’s funny, because the word *prodigal* doesn’t actually appear in the text—it was the popular name from a marginal heading in older bibles. In my Irish Catholic childhood, I remember wondering if Prodigal had something to do with that other religion—“protestants”. After all, they were seen as different and somewhat scandalous to the nuns who taught me. I also thought that Prodigal meant one who repents—who makes a confession, says sorry, seeks forgiveness. But prodigal does not mean repentant, it means ‘extravagantly wasteful’.

The *prodigal* in the story refers to the way the son uses his inheritance. Some commentators turn the Prodigal around to refer to the father—perhaps how recklessly and extravagantly he concedes to his younger son’s request to divide the inheritance while he was still living, but most likely because of how he extravagantly celebrates the return of his lost son.

In our culture we are encouraged by tax laws to divide up our estates and give things away before we die. Many young adults can only get a foot on the housing ladder through a gift towards the down payment. We also encourage our children to become independent, to leave home and seek their freedom and make their way in the world independently, and so we don’t really get the sense of the scandal of what the younger son does in demanding his share of the property that will belong to him on the death of his father. The land is considered to be a gift from God to their ancestors, and held in trust for future generations, not something to be broken up at the whim of a youngster. But the extravagant father does as he is bid. Then the younger son leaves on his big adventure—he travels beyond the sacred land of his ancestors to a distant country—and squanders his inheritance on “dissolute living.”

Just when he realizes that he’s broke, a famine hits that land. He enters survival mode, and the previously high living young man, becomes the hired hand of a pig farmer. He takes the job that’s lowest of the low—after all he is still Jewish, and here he is caring for the unclean beasts. If that distant country was Vancouver in 2010, perhaps he would have become a drug dealer, or involved in the survival sex trade. And then when he was at his lowest—‘he comes to himself’. How powerfully, elegantly simple a description—he comes to himself—and he realizes that his fathers servants have more than enough to eat, while he is starving to death. And at that moment, when he is at his lowest point, he has a flash of inspiration. He would go to

his father and confess that he has sinned, acknowledge that he had lost his status as a son and ask to be treated like one of the hired hands. Now some people cynically think that this is not a real transformation in the son. It comes from hunger, from need. But whatever the motivation, he returns home from that distant country.

Before he can even make it to his former home, to beg his father for an audience, and recite the confession he has prepared, something shocking happens. His own father sees him while he is still far away, and is filled with compassion. He abandons the dignity of his position, and gathering his robes up high so that he doesn't trip, he runs out to meet his son, throws his arms around him and kisses him. The son is forgiven before the confession is made. This is astounding. The forgiveness, the love, the healing come first, and come undeserved. That's grace. Amazing, scandalous grace. The son stutters the beginning of his confession, but before he can finish, the father calls for his servants to bring the best robe, a ring and sandals for his beloved son, and for the fatted calf to be slaughtered and a feast prepared. The younger son's status and honour is restored, but more than this is the father's joy "this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" This is a resurrection story! This is where many of our memories fade to black. The End, and the credits roll. Ahh, but wasn't that a great story?

But wait! Remember that this is a story of a man with two sons. And that older son, he is in quite a snit when he arrived home from working the field and hears the music and dancing as he approached the house. He is filled with rage and jealousy, and self-righteousness when the servant tells him what's going on—the big party for the safe return of his younger brother. The brother who ran off, leaving him with all the work and responsibility of two sons. The brother who caused public shame on the family. The brother who is dead to him. The older son is the one who day-in, day-out, has had to labour and toil, and care for his aging parents. But before he can do anything other than feel his anger, his father comes out of the house to him. And realizing his elder son's anger, he reaches out to him and begins to plead with him for understanding and compassion.

The elder son is spitting tacks, he's so angry. He can't even address his own father with a Dad! Or a father! He launches into his complaint with a plaintive and angry "Listen! For all these years, I have slaved for you, and I have obeyed your every command, yet you've never thrown a party for me, not even given me a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when 'THIS SON OF YOURS' came back, who has eaten up your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him."

When I think of all the characters in the parable—younger son, father and elder son, I think the one that I am most alike is the elder son. Perhaps this is because I am an elder child—I know what it is like to conform to your parents wishes—to do the right thing as my younger siblings did much wilder things than I could even have dreamed of. I know what it's like to feel like there are two sets of rules—one for me

and one for my younger brother. I confess that I sometimes see myself in this character. The one who tries to do the right thing, but who can end up bitter and self-righteous. Perhaps, behind his indignation, and his rage, is a little angry child who is mad that his father's attention has been taken up by the new baby. He's afraid that there isn't enough love to go around. He thinks he is loved less than the new child. And he is so wrong.

The father reaches out to the broken older brother—and conveys the love that he has for his son, a love that is unshakeable, a love that is not either/or, but is a both/and kind of love. He gently says, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; He was lost and has been found.” The father is reminding his elder son of the collective responsibility and of the relationship and tie that joins them. He reaches out to both of his lost sons.

The parable has an unfinished ending. Does the father return to the party with his older son following reluctantly behind, or does he return to the party empty handed with the older son still fuming in his anger, or does he return to the party, with his older son on one arm, and his younger on the other—loving them both, being loved by them both.

The love is extended and offered freely—but it is up to his son to respond to accept the love. I think that's how it is with God's love—it's there for the taking—we don't have to do anything to deserve it. We can be saints or sinners, there's nothing we can do that would make God love us any more than we already are loved. Thanks be to God!

Let's go out this week, and decide how we would finish the parable in our lives, putting ourselves in the different roles, trying them on, and deciding if we will love extravagantly ourselves, even loving those who are “unlovable”, and if we can accept love, and give in to the love that is freely extended, and that will not let go, Amen.