

“Reconciling Love”

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21, Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

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The gospel story we hear this morning is one of the best known and most beloved in scripture. We often call it the story of the Prodigal Son. Each time we hear it we find a new bit of wisdom. In one hearing we may identify with the younger son, in another, the elder. When we become parents and live through a particularly challenging episode with a child, we are moved to tears by the response of the loving father. Jesus tells this story to remind those who disapproved of his ministry what the kingdom of God would be like. This story is not about any particular human parent or child, but about God’s amazing grace and reconciling love. To those grumbling Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus illustrates what motivates him to behave the way he does.

This morning’s story is one of three consecutive stories in Luke’s gospel that deal with being lost and found. The “Prodigal Son”, the younger of the two, demands his inheritance from his father. He as much says, “Dad, you are dead to me, so give me what I deserve now so I can do with it whatever I please.” Surprisingly, his father dutifully complies. The younger son leaves home and lives beyond his means, squandering everything he has been given. Soon, he realizes he can no longer live this way, feeding the pigs and hoping to eat the scraps that cling to the bottom of his bucket. “He comes to himself,” and makes his way back home, not expecting to be welcomed as a son, but as one of his father’s servants. He thinks perhaps that in time, he may earn back his father’s trust and love.

While he is still far down the road, his father sees him and rushes to meet him. This is rather odd behavior for a man of his age and stature. The father not only welcomes his wayward son home, but rushes to receive him with open arms. This is not only a gesture of incredible love but also of protection. This son in demanding his inheritance, leaving town and then squandering it in unacceptable ways, has brought great shame to not only his father but his entire village. If anyone had seen him coming, they would have been justified to seize him and seek revenge. Therefore, the father’s response is meant to not only convey his reconciling love, but to protect his son from any harm.

The father is exuberant in his welcome, instructing his servants to kill the fatted calf and prepare a feast because his son that was lost is now found. This son whom he assumed to be dead has come back to life. Meanwhile, the older son returns home to find the house in an uproar. He is resentful and jealous wondering why his father never appreciated him and his obedience this way. To this the father replies, “Son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Many of us take real issue with the father’s response. While we envy him, we think it is not fair. Why would he let his son off so easily for his outrageously irresponsible behavior? We think of a teenager who has taken the family car, stolen money out of our

wallet and stayed out all night, well beyond the prescribed curfew. When she arrives home safely, perhaps even owning up to her misdeeds and seeking forgiveness, we likely embrace her and breathe a sigh of relief. We do not likely invite our neighbors, friends and loved ones to a pig roast in her honor. Instead we send her to her room while we contemplate how many weeks of grounding she will receive.

Jesus comes to teach us a more excellent way. He wants everyone who hears this story, Pharisees and scribes and disciples alike, to understand that he does not live by these rules. In fact, he has come to transform the previously held rules in favor of ones that are grounded in radical love and expressions of amazing grace. It is not easy to see the father behave as he does. However, it is not so strange for Jesus. This is how he lived his life every day. We see what he did; welcoming everyone, loving the unlovable, instructing us to love not those who love us but those who do not love us at all. We admire Jesus for living this way but we are not confident we can follow in his footsteps. The thought of being not just hearers of the word but also doers of the word makes us squirm.

Rev. Susan McCone says, “Understanding God’s justice is never easy. Basically, the difficulty lies in the fact that we confuse our sense of justice with God’s capacity for love. In human and secular understanding, the two have become entangled—and muddled. Justice has to do with fairness; love has to do with selflessness. Justice is balanced; love is extravagant. Justice almost always involves some measure of retribution; love calls us to reconciliation.” The deeper truth of this story lies in coming to grips with the breadth and depth of God’s love. There is wideness in God’s mercy that we have a hard time grasping. This is the point of the three lost and found parables.

The Pharisees and scribes continue to object to the way Jesus behaves. He eats with people who are unacceptable, unclean, and unforgiving. He offers healing to those who do not deserve it. He preaches reconciliation to those who won’t appreciate it. The Pharisees wonder when he will ever get it. Jesus asks the same question of us. Perhaps hearing a story that dismantles all our preconceived notions of justice will help us get it. “When we treat the prodigal son as a comeback story, we miss the point,” says preacher and teacher Thomas Long. “When we say, ‘head home, God’s feast is waiting!’ we misunderstand. It is not our remorse that forces God to set the banquet table; it is not our deep desire to start over again that leads God to roast the fatted calf. We cannot throw our own party. By all rights, this story ought to end with the younger son sweating in the furrows, eating in the slave quarters and spending his days serving his older brother. So if we prodigals see the father running in our direction with open arms, we should know in our souls that this is an event so unexpected, so undeserved, so out of joint with all that life should bring us, that we fall down in awe before this joyful mystery.”

Thankfully, God’s justice and our justice are not the same. The way God loves God’s creation and the way I love God’s creation are miles apart. It is Jesus’ deepest desire that I continue to grow in my faith so that one day I may bridge this gap. Often when we experience this kind of radical, undeserved, over the top kind of love, we come to our senses. We stop listening to the voice inside our head that tells us we are not worthy of God’s love, that we don’t measure up, that we are never good enough or right enough to

be so loved. When Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners he models this extravagant love and acceptance beyond our understanding. It is hard to imagine living as he does. Perhaps we will surprise even ourselves when we ever get the chance.

This story is a profound witness to God's amazing grace. Does the father act so extravagantly because the son finally came to his senses and was willing to change his wayward ways? This is what we call repentance, the turning away from sin and back toward a God centered life. Repentance is a word we don't talk much about in this church. The father does not care what motivated his son's return. He was going to welcome and love him regardless. The son could do nothing to earn this love. He obviously could do nothing to lose this love.

Several years ago there was a story on NPR's *Morning Edition* about a man who in a moment of crisis demonstrates this kind of profound reconciling love. Michael Garofalo told the story of a 31 year old New York City social worker named Julio Diaz. Garofalo noted that Diaz customarily followed the same routine each evening, ending his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night a few weeks earlier, as Diaz stepped off the No. 6 train and onto a nearby empty platform, his evening took an unexpected turn.

He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife and asked for his money. So Diaz gave the boy his wallet. As his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy, and asked, "Why are you doing this?" Diaz replied, "Well, if you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all I wanted to do was get dinner...and if you want to join me...hey, you're more than welcome." "I just felt maybe he really needed help," Diaz said. Remarkably, the boy agreed, and the unlikely pair walked into the diner and sat in a booth.

Shortly the manager came by, the dishwasher came by, and the waiters came by to greet him. Diaz remembered, "The kid was like, 'you know everybody here. Do you own this place?'"

"No," Diaz replied, "I just eat here a lot."

The boy responded, "But you're even nice to the dishwasher."

"Well, haven't you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?" Diaz asked him.

"Yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the boy said.

The social worker saw an opening. He asked the boy what he wanted out of life. "He just had almost a sad face," Diaz said. He couldn't answer—or he didn't want to.

When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for it. But if you give me my wallet back, I will gladly treat you."

The teen "didn't even think about it" and handed over the wallet, Diaz said, "So I gave him \$20...I figured maybe it would help him..." But Diaz asked for something in return, and the boy gave it to him. It was his knife. Afterward, when Diaz told his mother what happened, she said, "You're the type of kid that if someone asked you for the time, you gave them your watch."

"I figure, you know, if you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right. It's as simple as it gets in this complicated world."

Perhaps it really is that simple. Sometimes we are so astonished by grace that our only response is to change course, to stop the way we are living and become a new creation. Such grace changes our life forever. It is a profound mystery to be received into the loving arms of a loving God. God rushes to meet us, to love us, even to transform us. In the loving embrace perhaps all we can utter is "thank you." May it be so! Amen

Sources:

The Rev. Dr. Robert Dunham, PCUSA, "Which Comes First: Grace or Repentance?" Day I, March 14, 2010.

Rev. Susan McCone, Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent/C, March 14, 2010