

**The 4th Sunday in Lent – Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona**

“There was a man who had two sons.”

The parable of the prodigal son is a story that touches us deeply, not only because it is familiar and memorable, but because it sheds light on areas of our own lives where we feel wounded, where relationships have become strained or broken, and where we still hope for forgiveness and desire reconciliation. But the context of Jesus' teaching and the parable itself invite us to broaden our perspective beyond the typical title of the story. The parable is not just about the younger son's waywardness and his return to a loving and forgiving father. Its complexity draws us into relationships between all three characters, the father and the two sons, as well as the relationships between the Pharisees and scribes, those they deem to be sinners, and Jesus himself. We can personally relate to the characters in this gospel narrative because they remind us of relationships in our families of origin, and our current chosen families, including our circle of friends, and our church families. But for now let us ponder the family presented in today's parable.

First, there is a prodigal son, a young man who had grand ideas about living a life of luxurious extravagance. He thought he knew better than his father what a fulfilling life should look like. Without much regard for his father's feelings and all that had been provided for him while growing up, the younger son looked beyond all that. One might say that he even looked through the father who gave him life, he spoke past their relationship and dismissed the future that had been nurtured for him, and he decided to choose something else. We are not told what kind of relationship the younger son had with his father or older brother. Perhaps he felt overshadowed by his brother's industriousness. Perhaps he felt pressured by his

father to continue in the family business. Perhaps he felt the lure of the big city, whose opulence promised newness and excitement. Or, perhaps the younger son didn't really know *what* he wanted.

We don't hear much about the father until later in the parable, so we are left to imagine how he was feeling when his younger son asked him for his future inheritance. Such a thing was highly unusual for that culture and would have been interpreted as an insult, and embarrassment for the father and the whole family. The request would have shocked the community and provoked judgmental whispering about the younger son's arrogant sense of entitlement, and bewilderment about why the father felt obliged to honor his younger son's request.

And then there was the older son. What was his relationship with his younger brother? Did he project a sense of superiority and perhaps his own sense of entitlement as the first-born? Was there perceived favoritism that sparked sibling rivalry? How did the older son feel when his brother received his inheritance before their father died, and what was life like after he had left home?

I imagine that there were tears in the eyes of all of these characters at some point in the parable, but that the tears were shed for reasons as different as each person: the father's tears of sorrow and broken heartedness when the younger son decided to break apart from the family; the younger son's tears of shame and repentance upon returning home to his family; and the older son's tears of anger at his brother's recklessness and resentment at the unfairness of his father's hospitality. All three of these men were wounded by their own and each other's actions. And yet, their broken relationships and broken hearts revealed a longing for deep interconnectedness. While these three men felt broken by their differences,

they all desired to be seen and heard; to be acknowledged and appreciated; to experience belonging and to be loved. At times each of us has experienced a sense of woundedness around not belonging, not being appreciated, not being loved in the way that we desired. Depending on our life experiences and our personality styles we react differently to feelings of woundedness and lack of acceptance, which in turn influences how we relate to ourselves and one another.

Some of you know Robin Cameron, our local enneagram leader, who encourages deeper spiritual growth by examining how personality types influence our relationships with God and one another.¹ As I read this biblical passage, I couldn't help but think about some aspects of the personality types highlighted by the enneagram. Jesus had been sharing several parables about loss and redemption: the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and now the lost relationships between a father and his sons. Jesus told today's parable in response to grumbling by the Pharisees and scribes, religious leaders who have considerable influence and authority. The Pharisees and scribes objected to how Jesus was conducting his ministry saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." It was true that Jesus' teaching and healing attracted people from all walks of life, including tax collectors and sinners. The focus of Jesus' ministry was curiously inclusive and becoming unusually expansive. He seemed to be interested in building relationships with everyone. The wideness of Jesus care and concern gave some of the religious leaders pause. Like the younger brother in the parable, the Pharisees had become self-righteous in their ministry. They professed to know the best way of life. But in their pious, self-righteous, and judgmental behavior, they had gone

¹ David Daniels and Virginia Price. *The Essential Enneagram: The definitive Personality Test and Self-Discovery Guide*, revised and updated. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009.

astray from the God's way of love. Like the older son who worked long and hard to live up to the perceived standards of his father, the religious leaders set impossible standards for themselves and others, paradoxically pushing people away from God, and denying the goodness of the Living God in their midst. In all of these relationships I hear examples of personalities and behaviors identified through working with the enneagram. In exploring the enneagram, we are led toward spiritual growth by applying the teachings of Jesus; teachings that were expressed through words and actions; through his relationship with God and with all whom he encountered. I hear Jesus challenging people to step back and consider whether there is any value in defining themselves and one another by what they do or don't do; of determining another's worth against impossible standards; of withholding respect for difference and suppressing an appreciation for diversity; of blaming and shaming, causing stress, anger, and resentment.

One of the problems of succumbing to feelings of resentment is that it poisons our mind, heart, and spirit. But when we take a deep look at our resentments, we are offered clues to suppressed wants and needs; natural human desires and longings that have yet to be acknowledged; feelings that have yet to be examined; behaviors that have yet to be refined. Reflecting on our desires, longing, feelings, and behaviors helps us to acknowledge our self-worth and the worth of others through the eyes of the One who created us and cares for us. The One who loves us for who we are, not for what we do, or how much we give or are needed by others. We are all unconditionally and equally loved by our Creator God. And yet, do we simply receive God's mercy and grace, or do we also share them with others; do we offer unconditional love in all of our human relationships or with a select few? Do

we resist God's gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation, or do we take brave steps to relinquish what our ego tells us is important.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know that resistance to forgiveness and reconciliation inhibits spiritual healing and growth. It limits our ability recklessly and extravagantly sow seeds of God's love every where, with every thing and every one. In a book co-authored with his daughter, the late archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again." Acknowledging our pain and letting go of our woundedness leads us to forgiveness and reconciliation; to healing and wholeness. At times the healing process takes a longer or more circuitous path than others. But God is always inviting us into healing spaces of forgiveness and reconciliation; spaces where we are worthy to be seen, heard, and known; where we are appreciated, accepted, and belong; where we are abundantly loved simply for who we are. For we are not defined by what has happened to us, or by the best of what we've done, or by the worst of what we have done. We are simply defined, shaped, and blessed by God's boundless grace and prodigious love.

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