

“ARE WE WILLING TO THROW A FEAST”

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March 14, 2010 - Lent IV (C)

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

Lent summons us to repentance. Turning back, turning away, so we can turn toward something greater. It began the moment the ashes touched our foreheads, reminding us that dust we are and to dust we shall return. And the Lenten journey ends with the startling grace of Easter morning!

Repentance allows us to enter into that new life, leaving the old behind. As Paul says in our Epistle reading, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new!” Repentance makes us ready for the shock of Easter, as we enter into something that has never happened before. Something filled with promise, but totally unknown.

When the Chilean earthquake that killed more than 700 people in Chile on Feb. 27 shifted the Earth’s axis and shortened the day, it also created something entirely new. According to a NASA scientist, it’s known as the ‘Ice-Skater Effect’.¹

“As the ice skater . . . [is] going around in a circle, and she pulls her arms in, she gets faster and faster. It’s the same idea with the Earth going around if you change the distribution of mass, the rotation rate changes.” .

But rather than a change in the distribution of a petite skater’s maybe 115 pounds, an earthquake can shift hundreds of kilometers of rock by several meters, changing the distribution of mass on the planet, which affects the Earth’s rotation.

So now, back to the gospel. We’re midway through Lent, and the story of the Prodigal Son comes along in the lectionary and offers us a glimpse of what repentance — or a 180° rotation — might look like in a human life. The wayward son wakes up in the middle of a life far from his upbringing and “comes to himself,” as the story says. He turns back to who he really is, as a child of his father. The father in the story, too, must have had his own transformation. Any anger, resentment or judgment that he had when his son first left is gone now, and he is ready to jump up and run toward his son the minute he comes into sight on the road home.

I always imagine him a little more complex than the black-and-white version in the parable. I’m reminded of the hug I’ve given to a child who had wandered away, or who had disobeyed and gotten lost. The hug of relief and welcome was often followed by the “Look what you put me through!” and, back in the day, a swat on the behind, followed by another, longer hug.

But let’s look at this story in its context. Listen carefully to the introduction:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Luke has set up two opposing groups — the tax collectors and sinners, on the one hand. (And the tax collectors were considered scum because they always took more than even the Romans demanded, and kept the overage for themselves.) And then on the other hand, we have the Pharisees and scribes.

When we read scripture, it’s always helpful to note with whom we identify. Are we the dishonest tax

collector? Do we think like the sinner, since we know we have all “sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”? Or are we among the Pharisees and scribes . . . the church leaders and keepers of the sacred scrolls? Something to ponder as we move ahead . . . try to stay aware of which person or group you’re identifying with.

Now at this point, the lectionary inexplicably omits two important and related stories between that opener about Jesus welcoming sinners and the longer parable about the prodigal. Maybe the men who designed the lectionary just wanted to make sure we got out of worship in time for lunch. But I think those two stories are important to our interpretation, if nothing more than reinforcement for the point Jesus is making. Listen - and remember, you’re probably identifying with someone in each parable as I read it.

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

And then Luke has Jesus launch into the parable of the prodigal.

The hinge in the middle of that story comes in verses 18-20. The prodigal says, “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

It sounds a little like Jeff Bridges’ character in the movie, *Crazy Heart*. “Bad Blake, whom Bridges portrayed, was a washed-up country musician who finds love, loses love, hits bottom, and gets redemption. In the condensed timeline of Hollywood movies, he achieves sobriety in only a four month stay at a rehab facility. Having admitted his alcoholism in the midst of his rehab group, he is soon picked up by Robert Duvall, and announces that he’s all better. (A little too slick for real life, but a poignant story of repentance.

So now the prodigal sets off and goes to his father. And we read, “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

Now, as I noted before, if I were that father, I think my joy would have included at least a small “what were you thinking?” But expressing that sentiment would be very human, not the sort of thing Jesus is describing when he says there is joy in heaven over a repentant sinner! That joy is much purer than anything we might experience.

And then there’s the older brother — now who doesn’t understand and sympathize with him? He reflects our culture’s concern that folks receiving their just desserts. But while the brother is stuck in the very human, and very unheavenly, notions of the way things ought to be, the father is very willing to act contrary to the listeners’ expectations, the established cultural norms.

Here is one of the bits of Good News in the reading: The son has been open to being changed — he has had an epiphany as the result of hard times, not unlike Bad Blake in the movie. And he is willing to acknowledge, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And the father seems to have had his own transformation. Any anger, resentment or judgment that he had when his son first left is gone now, and he is ready to jump up from his work and run toward his son the minute he comes into sight on the road home. Given how deeply entrenched our attitudes are about "reaping what we sow," these changes are every bit as fundamental as the earth's axis being altered. And in that way, they are symbols of the entirely new creation we become when we repent, turn away from our past, and turn toward Christ.

The close of the parable has two statements that are quite different from each other, but co-exist in the heavenly reality. First, in verse 31 we find the next bit of Good News, though the older brother isn't inclined to see it that way! The father says to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

For everyone who has taken the high road, paid their dues, done the right thing, returned the cashier's extra change, stepped courteously aside for another to pass, sought reconciliation, offered their proverbial coat and tunic, and done the loving thing . . . only to see someone else take the easy way and end up ahead, this is the Good News. In the church, it's the persevering, always reliable pair of hands for any needed task. We don't throw a party for that person, but Jesus reminds us that all the abundance of God's love is right there every day, at every turn, for that person. It may not be sensational, but it is abiding love.

And then in verse 32, we have the final word — a thought that ties us back to the story of the shepherd and the one lost lamb. Jesus ends the parable by saying, "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."

Which person in the story are we reflective of? Who do you identify with? And, for our congregation, which one do we as a faith community embody? — the youngest son, the father, or the older brother? The question is - Is our community closed or "Are We Willing To Throw A Feast?"

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ENDNOTE

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- i. Alex Morales, "Chilean Quake Likely Shifted Earth's Axis, NASA Scientist Says", *Business Week*, March 01, 2010, (<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-03-01/chilean-quake-likely-shifted-earth-s-axis-nasa-scientist-says.html>)