

Lent 4c- The Prodigal Son

Rev. Jenny

I love how relatable our scriptures can be. *And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."* How often do we fail to appreciate what is in front of us because we are too busy finding fault and complaining? Those Pharisees and scribes were in the presence of God, but they were too judgemental about who Jesus was hanging out with to appreciate it.

So, Jesus tells them a story about another judgemental person who is too busy complaining to see the value of what is right in front of him. The story begins with a rude son who goes to his dad and basically says, "I can't wait around for you to die so give me my inheritance now." The father obliges and severs off the young son's portion who then goes on to squander it all on fast living.

We might think that Jesus is telling the Pharisees about this sinner. But the reality is, the story doesn't end there. This son, who has offended his father in so many ways, realises his error and returns with his tail between his legs, ready to apologise and work as his father's lowest employee.

But the father runs out to meet his son, an act in and of itself unusual. Patriarchs did not run, let alone out to meet a disgraceful son. But this one did and instantly calls for a great celebration marking the safe return of his son and welcoming him back to the family.

Now we get to the real message in the story. The elder son, who has stayed home and worked hard, hears a party happening. He questions one of his workers about what this party is about. Horror of horror, this party is for his brother, the one who took off and wasted a portion of the family fortune.

To truly appreciate how the Pharisees and others would hear this story, we need to understand the culture of the time. An elder son would receive a larger portion of the inheritance because it would be his responsibility to look after the family, to keep them safe. It was his responsibility to go looking for his younger brother and bring him back. He did not.

And now there was a party which would take resources that rightfully belonged to this elder son. And this elder son, like the Pharisees, grumbles:

Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

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But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

This family feast for the returning younger son is the centre of The Prodigal Son parable. The father throws a feast, filled with “music and dancing” and the greatest delicacies to mark the reconciliation and restoration of his son. He says that with the younger son home “we have to celebrate”. There was no choice. So why is the feast so important?

In the Old Testament, meals ratified covenants, celebrated victories, and marked all special family occasions, and transitions, such as births, weddings, and funerals.

In ancient times, meals would last all evening. Evening meals became the centre of family life and therefore both a symbol and practice of intimacy.

But we do not need to be people of the first century to grasp the importance of the family table. It is at meals that we too feel at home. The dining table represents the centre of family life. It is at our great feasts that no matter what else is going on in our lives, we can feel most at home. It is a time of celebration but also to re-solidify the family unit. It is a time for thanksgiving and also forgiveness. The true health of a family can be seen at the family table.

In the parable, the elder son refuses to come into the feast because that would mean he would have to forgive his brother and he is not yet ready, if ever, to do that. He did not want to stoop so low as to eat with a sinner because he felt he was the righteous one. He stayed home and worked hard.

However, we realise that the elder brother, in refusing to eat with and forgive his younger brother is in fact himself a sinner. Had he come to the table, the family would have been restored and all would have been forgiven. But the elder brother is too caught up in the rules and his love of monetary worth to see the value of reconciliation and celebration. He is unable to forgive and therefore unable to truly come to the table. He is also unable or unwilling to repent of his role of refusing to spend time or money to go looking for his younger brother.

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This parable gives a foretaste of that great feast, the one we call Communion or the Eucharist. To come to the Communion table, we do not have to be perfect, only repentant. We too need to make sure we have forgiven those we need to before we come to the table. We come to the

table because we too are forgiven but also because we have cause to celebrate. We celebrate the death and resurrection of the true elder son, and the love of the Father.

As we come to the table, we create a new community of men and women who regularly break bread together to celebrate the new life and common union we have through Jesus. It is not enough just to have an individual personal relationship with God through Christ. We must be an active part of the feast, the new community, the family of God.

We need to return to this Church and gather around the table. We need to share stories and offer forgiveness. We need to stop being judgemental and leave the judgement up to God. We need to rebuild our relationship with each other and with God. We have been apart for a long time. It is time to come home.

So, let us gather around this wooden family table and remember the past, celebrate the present and look towards the future as we feast as the family of God.