**Lent 4**

**March 6, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

The gospel reading from Luke begins this way:

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons.”*

This story is all too familiar. We know it as the “Prodigal Son.” But I’m not so sure that this story is so much about the son, as about the father. The word “prodigal” means “wasteful expenditure” which certainly applies to the younger son in this parable. The word “prodigal” can also mean “extravagant” which could also apply to the father’s actions upon the younger son’s return. We know this story so well that we tend to look at it from only one side … through only one lens. But perhaps it should be called “The Prodigal Son’s Father” instead … or just the “Prodigal Father.” Perhaps the most prodigal person in this family is the father, for he is the one who spends both his money and his honor without counting any of the cost. And the question for us is, “How, and to whom, might we act as the Prodigal Father?” And, if we were to consider it in relation to this faith community, “What might it mean for us to be a Prodigal Church?”

This reading this morning is relatively long for a Sunday morning Gospel reading. Yet, it still contains only the skeleton of what a first century Middle Eastern person would have heard when it was told.

* A son asks for his inheritance … while his father is still alive and kicking.
* The father gives his son his share, the son sells it, takes the money and goes to a “far country” where he spends it on loose living.
* This is the “prodigal” part … the son is so wasteful that he ends up broke, goes to work tending pigs … very non-kosher.
* In his squalor the son “comes to himself” and decides that he will go home and at least do better than to tend pigs.
* His father sees him coming … runs to him … hugs him … gives him a kiss … and puts a robe on his back and a ring on his finger. The father then throws an extravagant … prodigal … party for his younger son.
* In the meantime, the older son returns from working hard tending the grape vines or the olive orchard or whatever it was he was dutifully doing. He hears the noise of the party … finds out that his younger brother has returned … and gets very angry.
* The father of the two sons leaves the party to talk to the older son … the older son who is acting very self-righteous … and the father responds with “You have been with me always. What is mine is yours. But this brother of yours was dead and is now alive … he was lost but now is found.”

There is a lot written between the lines in this story, but I think we all get the point.

Perhaps the father can be seen as a metaphor for the faith community. Surely the two sons of the story live together in the Church as we know it: the younger is one who comes out of hunger and desperation, and the elder is the one who disdains the welcome given to the younger. It may be that this parable is not speaking about how God *will* act, but about how we *should* act to the one who was dead but is now alive, the one who was lost but is now found.

The hungry son stands as a challenge to people of faith, as we consider how we treat the hungry. The citizen of the faraway country treated him justly but not warmly. He was welcomed to work, but was given nothing else: neither food nor the emotional sustenance of a hug, a kiss, or a welcome. Sent to do the dirtiest and most menial task, he was all but forgotten as one of the mass of the homeless poor, nameless and alone. By contrast, when he returned to the home he had rejected, and to the father he had dishonored, he was welcomed as a son of the house. He was given all of the emotional and physical sustenance he needed; and his return became a gift to the whole community.

This parable asks of us hard questions. How do we treat those who come to our doors hungry and homeless? And I don’t mean just literally hungry and literally homeless, but those who are hungry for love and spirit and community … those who cannot find a home in any traditional faith community? In the parable, Jesus painted a picture of what the faith community could be: a community that celebrates the return of every hungry child, not asking how or why that child was hungry, but welcoming that child as part of the family of God. Such a move is prodigal … it is foolish … it is wasteful. The challenge is this: What might it mean for us to be the prodigal church?

The elder son may well be a bigger challenge to all of us in communities of faith. As dishonorable, arrogant, and greedy as this elder son was, he was also right. For all of the older son’s justified rage, however, he erred the minute he said "this son of yours" instead of "this my brother." For even as he confronted his father with accepting his brother's shameful behavior, the elder son could not see the shamefulness of his own behavior. Out of his anger … his self-righteousness … he could not fathom the gentleness of his father, both toward his brother and toward him.

The elder son poses this difficult Lenten question: To whom are we unwilling to offer the father's prodigal welcome? Who are we unwilling to accept, because we know that we are right … and they must be wrong? What would it cost to lay down our righteous indignation and come into the party to which we have been invited? Remember, this parable was prompted by the criticism of Jesus eating with “sinners.” The scribes and Pharisees are often painted as cruel, but they are no different from many good, churchgoing people in their objection to Jesus' associations. The parable of the Prodigal challenges us again: stop being “right” and come, join the party.

Week after week, as I stand at the altar, I say, “This is a banquet for all of God’s people, and we welcome and encourage all to receive the bread and wine at our communion rail.” There have been those who, like the Pharisees and scribes, grumble and say, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” To them I want to say, in the same love that the father has in this parable of the Prodigal: stop being “right” and come, join the party.

The party was thrown for the Israelites at Gilgal as we heard in the Book of Joshua … a homeless people in an alien land. And in Paul’s Second Letter to the new Christian community in Corinth he said, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God.”

The hungry and homeless will come to our door … those who need spiritual nourishment … and those who are seeking shelter in a community of faith that will accept them. They are cold and vulnerable, and I, for one, say “Throw open the door and welcome them into our home.” I really don’t care how they got there, or why they are hungry or homeless. They are children of God … and they are our brothers and sisters. I believe we are called to be that Prodigal Church by acting with radical hospitality to all of God’s children.

Amen.