

**4 Lent
March 31, 2019**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.
AMEN**

I wonder if some of you kinda' tuned out the Gospel reading when you realized it was the very familiar story known as the Prodigal Son. But the story of the son who left home and squandered everything that he had been given, AND the story of the dutiful brother who stayed home AND the story of the father ALL have great truths for each of us. We will be blessed if we can learn from them.

To begin, I would like to call your attention to our Book of Common Prayer service of private confession called the Reconciliation of a Penitent. This is one of the seven sacraments of the Episcopal Church and the World- wide Anglican Communion, and the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. Probably most of you have not taken advantage of this powerful sacrament that our church offers, and in fact, probably have never read the words that are in the service. So I just want to call your attention to the two places where the story of the Prodigal son is a part of the Reconciliation of a Penitent, part of our Sacrament of Confession. The first is where the Penitent says...quote”Through the water of Baptism you clothed me with the shining garment of righteousness, and established me among your children in your kingdom. BUT I HAVE SQUANDERED the inheritance of your saints, and have wandered far in a land that is waste.”..... Can't you hear the words of the Prodigal son as he approaches his father?///// And then,/// at the conclusion of the confession, ...the Priest says, “Now there is rejoicing in heaven; for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and are now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord. Abide in peace. The Lord has put away all your sins.” ///// Can't you just hear the father in the story of the prodigal son as he so gently says to the elder son, “It is fitting to make merry and be glad, for this young brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.” ////

So much has been said and so much has been written about the Prodigal Son that we, here this morning, may wonder how we can walk this path again, with the father and the two sons, and find new insights. But I know there is a deep message here that we need to consider, or maybe what I really mean is that there are several messages for us. So, let's walk through it, yet again, hoping to discover new riches for us in our spiritual lives.

“There was a man who had two sons.” Isn't it just possible that within everyone of us there are two facets to who we are, and that this could be one reason for the timeless power of this parable? Let's pursue this thought and see where it leads. The younger son said...”give me the share...that would eventually belong to me.” Isn't there something in us that is impatient in waiting, wanting to know now, wanting to possess now, to see now, to explore now? /////

And then we read...”The younger son ...traveled to a distant country.” Sometimes in our lives there IS something in us that is dissatisfied with what IS, frustrated with our here and now, with those who are so familiar to us or with the indescribable sameness of our surroundings, our lives. We long for

another country, so to speak. It really doesn't so much matter WHERE as that it is elsewhere. AND THEN...as today's Prodigal Son story continues...we heard...

"He squandered his property in dissolute living." Well, we probably get it about that heady feeling of freedom, of being able to express who we really are. The truth is, of course, that this is far from freedom. It is merely an expression of appetite, an exhilarating discovery of what we conceive to be our RIGHTS. We are not really FINDING our self. We are merely discovering the self-centeredness that lies within us and waits for expression in one way or another. ///

BUT...Stay Tuned..////

Further on in the Gospel we read, "A severe famine took place and he began to be in need." The dryness and the emptiness eventually spread across his very being...the landscape of his very soul.////// But then comes the day when..."he comes to himself!"...He comes to his senses. "He comes to himself" This is THE KEY to this whole story. He wakes up. He gets it. He stops kidding himself. Or, if we can relate to him, it is when we also find our true, honest self. Probably slowly and painfully. And *when* we get it...when this realization occurs...we WANT to go home...we no longer want to go to a far place, a distant place, but to our own true and whole self. What then becomes important is whether we have it within ourselves to forgive ourselves, whether the "older one" within us can forgive the wandering child in us, and welcome us home, as does the father in our Lord's story today. Could we, like that father in the story, run out to meet that errant part, put our arms around him and kiss him, with joy in welcoming that which was lost?

Sometimes it is not easy to come home to one's self...to settle into the wholeness, the fullness of who we are. Another part of us appears...the elder child within, the responsible part of us, the part that feels guilty for what has happened, that is shamed by the discovery of the wandering prodigal part within.

This very familiar story gives us the opportunity to really see where we are with God. Think about it. Do we identify more with the younger son who was reckless...or maybe would like to be? Do we identify more with the elder son who was dutiful, but surely did not enjoy life and ultimately was resentful? Or, does our heart resonate with the father, that no matter what, we would welcome a child home even after they had done dreadful things?

The story says that "the elder son was in the field...and he heard music and dancing...and he refused to go in." He would not join the party. Self righteousness precluded forgiveness. A whole host of things...all good and admirable in themselves...emerge with great distortion. Loyalty emerges as jealousy. Constancy shows as rigidity. Responsibility as self-righteousness. Such shadows refuse to sit down at the table of celebration; they refuse to join the party; they *will not* dance. Negative elements within us can sometimes prevent us from coming home to our true selves and to our true relationship with those God has given us to be the closest with. The negative elements within us, feelings of self-justification, which we may have reinforced over time, can prevent us from a homecoming of joy and forgiveness. ...and a sense of wholeness. ..indeed...a sense of peace...perhaps even joy.

I used to feel that this story was complete without the piece of the older brother. Now, after a life of living, I am certain that there is some very good reason for our Lord to have introduced the elder

brother into the story. We try very hard to read the story in a way that lets the party go on, but as we listen to the pleading of the father, we realize that the party cannot happen in quite the same way without the inclusion of the elder brother. The father says to his first born son, the elder brother: "Son, all that is mine is yours. /// But we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead and has come to life." That is the show stopper!!!! We have to realize that God loves the older brother just as much as he loves the younger brother. Jesus is telling this parable to a group of people who are self-righteous "so called, elder brothers", people who were angry with him for celebrating life with outcasts.

We do it with ourselves. We do it in our families, those given to us to travel most closely with us in our journey closer to God. When we hear someone else being praised, we think...gee, what about me? We grow up in a world all our lives filled with grades and scores and statistics, and consciously or unconsciously we are always trying to measure up. We are just like the elder brother in that so much JOY flies right by us simply because we do so much comparing.

How true it is that love always seems to be mingled with some pain. Coming to oneself may be necessary and good, but the self we come to, the person we realize we are, may not be totally satisfying. Personally, I think that the father in the story is the self of the loving God in Christ who declares forgiveness even when the warring elements of our own selves will not. It is that self...the very presence of God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus...it is that flamboyant love expressed to the son who had wandered...it is that prodigal, wasteful, extravagant, enthusiastic love that a part of us which was lost to ourselves has been found...it is THAT which is THE message for us...the gift to us of today's so familiar parable of the prodigal son.

Remember the parable about the lost coin? A woman turns her house upside down in search for a missing coin. Will God not turn the world upside down in search for one lost soul? One broken relationship? Will he not turn the world upside down...whatever it takes?... In God's desire that one of his beloved, one of his beloved...that's us... will come to themselves and be reconciled...within themselves, with another, and with him? Is that not the yearning of our God? Reconciliation within ourselves, with another and certainly with God?!//////////

Every time we come to our self in a spirit of repentance and a desire for wholeness, our heavenly father rushes out to embrace us and to welcome us home. During this Lenten Season, may we find ourselves in the story of the Prodigal Son...and then...COME TO THE PARTY!

AMEN