

Forgiven and Forgiving

Psalm 145: 8-21 & Luke 15: 11-32

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 5th June 2005/ Sacrament of Holy Communion

Whenever we hear a reading of this parable it is amazing how many tend to identify with the older brother who stayed at home, followed the rules, and never did anything to offend his father. Somehow throwing an outrageously extravagant party for a wayward, impudent son and doing little for the faithful one who never squandered anything seems grossly unfair. Where's the justice in this? That's what a lot of people want to know. It doesn't seem to make any sense, this so-called parable of the prodigal son. It should really be called the parable of the wayward or lost son, or better still, the parable of the prodigal – extravagant – father. There's probably no other parable as well known as this one and yet its meaning often eludes us – and maybe even haunts us by disturbing our sensibilities.

Several years ago I preached on this text, focusing on the wayward son and after the service several people asked me at the door, "What about the older brother?" For, we're card-carrying Presbyterians after all, upstanding, law-abiding, American citizens, to boot. We're scrupulous with our money – maybe to a fault. We count every penny. We never waste a thing. Actually, what you need to know here is that to ask for his inheritance early was another way of saying to his father, "I wish you were dead." We're not like the son who wasted his inheritance. That's not us. We don't behave that way. So, in many ways we might think this story is not about us. But then what do we do about the older brother? Isn't that how we're supposed to behave? Then why isn't he being rewarded? Why isn't the father throwing expensive parties for the good children? Where's the justice in this? Why be good?

This is where we get stuck. Let me just say at the outset, if you're looking for ordinary justice here, then be prepared to leave disappointed this morning, maybe shocked. If you're looking for a simple morality tale, a good story to tell the children so they can grow up socialized into highly efficient, over functioning adults who are incessantly obsessed with being perfect and getting it right and never making a mistake, this is not the story to tell to them. In fact, these parables of Jesus are *not* morality tales at all. What I mean is if we read the parables simply to know how we ought to live our lives, then we're missing their message altogether. Jesus doesn't tell this story so that his followers can model their lives after one son over the other – which son does one choose? In many ways, the parable is not about the sons at all, neither of them! It is about the nature of the

father – it's about God. Jesus uses these parables to crack open our badly deformed, poorly conceived, self-centered images of God. Through and through it is all about God – *God's justice, God's forgiveness, God's prodigality*, which is another way of saying *God's extravagance, God's generosity, and God's liberality*. So that we come away from the parable feeling breathless – so *this* is who God is!

I want to focus on the older son here, but first we need to remember that the younger son asked for his inheritance early. The father gives it to him and freely lets him go (implicitly, this verse could be a whole sermon on the nature of God's freedom.) He sinks low, very low, squandering his inheritance, squandering his identity as a child of God (which God gives us the freedom to do). When the son realizes that even his father's servants have it better, he decides to return and on the way rehearses what he's going to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants." But note what happens in the story – don't miss this!

The son is at a distance, but the father sees him – as if God is always, expectantly searching for him. The father then runs after him – *runs!* In his society old men don't run. To run would risk exposing one's legs, leaving oneself and others open to shame. But the father doesn't care – he runs. He sees the son and has compassion. He runs after him – even before the son has the chance to say a thing – the father embraces him. *That's what God is like.* Then the son begins his prepared speech, "Father, I have sinned" – but the father breaks him off, almost mid-sentence, almost ignoring it, never accepts his apology. Then he says to the servants, "Bring quickly the best robe and rings and the fatted calf and let's party!"

So what about the elder son? He's flipping mad and refuses to join the party. Why? *Maybe because his understanding of justice is getting in the way of knowing his father's love.* He made the fatal assumption that obedience and service will earn his father's favor. Such a view precludes or occludes – blinds – the son to the depth of the father's love. Justice is not *quid-pro-quo*, tit for tat. Justice is not evening the score, getting one's just deserts. I've always felt sad for the older son, he always sounds so jealous. Being an older brother, myself, with a younger brother who always got away with more than I did, I can understand his jealousy. I was always the responsible one, the careful one who rarely got in trouble. I can understand the jealousy.

But focusing upon the resentment of the older son prevents us from seeing God's relationship to him. *For this is still all about God.* And so reading this story I've come to feel sorry for him because his assumptions about obedience and

service, playing it safe, getting it right have all taken him far from knowing God's grace. *He's lived so close to the father all these years and doesn't really know who he is. He's living right under his roof and yet it's as if his father is a complete stranger to him.* The oldest son doesn't understand grace – he's in just as much need of it as his brother is. The father reaches out to both in the same way. Jesus is concerned with the wayward son just as much as he is concerned (maybe more so) with the obedient son who doesn't understand grace, for he, too, is lost. Both, in varying ways, are far from grasping the power of God's grace. It's only when we grasp grace – or more correctly, when we have been grasped by grace that we come to fathom what God's justice looks like – which is so unlike anything we're used to see playing out in our culture with its endless fascination with the trial of celebrities, so unlike anything we see on Court TV or read about in the newspapers.

Grace, like justice, does not keep score – *could you imagine what it would be like if God kept score?*¹ Where is the good news in that? It's almost as if God rips up the score card for the *greater* goal of being reconciled with us – the goal is reconciliation, to restore the relationship. It's not about keeping score or getting even or getting one's due.² If forgiveness and grace came by evening a score then how do you begin to forgive the one who wronged you? Or how do you expect to be forgiven by the one you've wronged? How else does reconciliation occur?

God's justice, like God's grace, pulls together and does not divide.
It heals and does not destroy.
It restores and does not condemn.
It goes seeking the lost and does not cast anyone away.
It runs and searches and finds and finds and finds until are all home again.

I don't have a fatted calf for you this morning (for which, you might be grateful), but something even better; we have these gifts of God, bread and wine – this joyful feast of the people of God, this party thrown for the wayward and those who haven't ventured very far from home, but are still hungry for God's forgiving love, hungry to know what it feels like to be again daughters and sons of God.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

¹ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: Lewis B. Smedes, "Only a free person can live with an uneven score." Cited in Marjorie J. Thompson, *Companions in Christ: The Way of Forgiveness* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002), p. 88.

² 2 Corinthians 5: 19. Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 16.

Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland