

Lent IV Year C

“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!
And they began to celebrate.”

The story of the prodigal son is probably the most famous in Christian lore...so much so that I have to admit I've gotten a little bored with it. But still the story is something of an icon in modern western Christianity....It has come to embody the highly western and Calvinistic notion of repentance necessarily leading to salvation...the cosmic quid pro quo, as it were...the poor miserable sinner come home at last...a theology that goes something like this: If I repent of my sinful ways and return to God I will be amply forgiven and feted and loved beyond all measure...and some televangelists add cars and houses and bank accounts to the list....There is a big mega-non-denominational church in Austin Texas called Riverbend Church...It has some six thousand members....five 45 minute services a Sunday...the sermon being thirty five minutes of the 45....There is a giant mural at the entrance to the auditorium of the contrite prodigal with his head laid on the chest of his father...both blonde and Anglo-Saxon looking...and the caption underneath reads.... “Repent and come home to Abba”.....It fits with our American ethos...the unredeemed exile, Melville's Ishmael, of Twain's Huck Finn, of the kid in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian....the lost and shamed in search of home....but somehow, perhaps through overuse this text has been softened, romanticized...it has become something of a platitude....a short formulaic tableau to the truth....the quid pro quo of so-called being saved.

I hope today we might find the fire that is in this text....For Luke's audience this text would have been shocking and unnerving and disturbing, and its theology is not so much concerned with either repentance or forgiveness...so let's look and see if we can find the edginess of this text. First let's set the stage....Jesus has just been accused by the scribes and Pharisees...the religious establishment, of welcoming and eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors, so Jesus tells three parables, the first about the one lost sheep, the second about the lost coin and then, the third, our reading for today, my title, *the two lost sons*... Three stories about lost things, and finding them.

The setting is a rural agricultural estate occupied by a well to do family...we know they are well to do because we are told that they have slaves and cattle and arable land...the father is able to hire musicians...there is a ceremonial robe and a family ring.....and also, as if we have to be told,

we are shown that this family is dysfunctional...the great redundancy: dysfunctional family...Is there any other?...nothing punches our buttons as much as matters of family, and particularly when it comes to money, right?...now, Jesus has gone to meddling...he does that a lot you may have noticed...families in the ancient world stuck together, for reasons social and economic they lived together inter-generationally...to work the land, raise livestock, rear children...and further these extended families were intimately connected to the community around them...pooling of resources was essential for survival in this world...so there was a strict social code that enabled and protected this economic and social system...one served in the family...and one honored the community, all interconnected...so at its heart this story is about family and community relationships, and the sanctity thereof....and that's where this story begins to press upon the listener.

First we are told, that the younger son asks for his inheritance. The audience would know that the eldest son gets twice the inheritance of the younger...so the younger would get a third, a third of the farm and livestock...but inheritance occurs only at the death of the father in this culture...so It would be unthinkable for either of the sons to ask for their inheritance prematurely...It is the same as saying to the father that I wished you were dead...In Jewish custom this would have elicited a good slap across the face of this impertinent son, at least...but the father inexplicably honors the request...so this is no ordinary patriarch...the neighbors now know something is amiss...and therefore the community is at risk as well...the younger son hurriedly gets out of town, cashes in his inheritance...and proceeds to lose what he has.

Now there is an ancient Jewish custom, a ritual of shunning, (like the Amish and other cultures around the world) for those who lose their wealth to gentiles...called the qetsatsah...wherein the shamed one would wear a rough robe and his family and surrounding community would offer him a jar of ashes and burned wheat...the jar is then broken at his feet...and he can no longer speak to or live within the community as an equal...well, the younger son does just that...he loses all his money to gentiles...how do we know he has lived among gentiles?...he's been taking care of pigs...not kosher from where he comes from...so he languishes in exile, lost and shamed and alone and starving....and we are told that he comes to himself....the Syriac version of this text translated from the ancient Aramaic, reads "he got smart"...sounds more fable-like.

He reasons that in order to live he will ask for pity from his father; he will at least be able to work as a hired hand and eat...he's thinking of himself still...practicing his speech over and over in his mind...maybe just

maybe he can use his naïve father one more time....you can see where I'm going with this....there is no repentance here, only self interested preservation.....and in the back of his mind the looming getsatsah.

And then our story picks up steam...the father spots the son far off and runs to meet him...according to Greek rhetoric, men of station do not run in public....women may, but men may not....the father runs like a woman to greet his lost son now found...and before the son can get a sentence of his practiced plea out, the father, not even listening, has ordered the ritual family robe of welcome and the ring bearing their name...and has ordered a feast...no, this will not be a getsatsah...this will be a banquet of welcome...this father is breaking all the rules now...before the community has had time to get the public shunning organized...they've all been invited to a feast of roast beef and music and dancing....the father has found one of the lost ones...and it is something to celebrate...

And then there's the older son, the one I identify with, the one who has stayed dutifully in the family business, followed the rules, honored the customs, and he is appalled at this hedonistic display for this shamed one, the one who has brought shame to the household...and shame to the community...and he angrily refuses to join the party...another thing not done in this culture...one attends one's father's public feasts...and to make matters worse he argues angrily in public with his father, who has left his guests, another taboo, to plead for the elder son to join the celebration....by now Luke's audience is in a froth, taboo after taboo...a dysfunctional family indeed....and now the audience is onto the ploy.....the audience now find themselves in the tableau...the younger son, he is the sinner and tax collector...the older brother, the scribe and Pharisee...and the father, in Christlikeness pursuing both with all due passion to reconcile them in this community that glows inside the house, alive with music and dance...the aroma of veal chops, medium rare, with olive oil and thyme....

This of course is a love story par excellence....this is a story about a God who loves us beyond all custom or tradition....a God who will not rest until all are at table...slave and free, man and woman, Jew and Greek...all means all...that's good news people...that's all of us...we sinners and we Pharisees are being pleaded with to come and eat and drink and live and there be found, found by transforming hospitality..... "The Scribes and Pharisees say that you eat with sinners and tax collectors".....and Jesus' answer to the Pharisees is this: O yes, that I do, and I shall forever, and you are invited too...Not only will I eat and drink with them...I'll run like a girl to the edge of town for them and for you...I'll leave my guests for you and for them....I'll spare no expense and drag you kicking and screaming to the

banquet I have prepared...I'll clothe you royally...I'll treat you like family... You are mine...and all of mine is yours....and I won't stop this reverie of reconciliation until we are all together at gracious table.

This ain't Calvin folks...there is no mention of repentance in this story...there is no mention of forgiveness (and both of those things are important to be sure in our lives of faith)....but this story is about one who is brought into God's gracious favor through lavish welcome and generous hospitality...and that is what we call grace...the older brother in envy misses the point the way we perhaps miss the point...the feast is not for the younger brother as the older brother assumes...the feast is a celebration of reconciliation...the younger son is not the protagonist here...It is the father who is, the father on a quest for reconciliation and wholeness...reconciliation, what God gets up for in the morning....And reconciliation is salvation...salvation, not about the individual, but salvation always about right relationship in community...I imagine the Loving One standing outside his guest-filled house still pleading with the older son, still....and he pleads with some of us sinners and Pharisees....amid our lonely exiles, in our shame, in our arrogance and self righteousness...he will not stop until we've come....she like a mother running for her child will not cease her labor....will not cease no matter what convention says....and it is for us to plead as well....we the father mother as well...we the ones, protagonists for the good...we the ones who must pursue the dead and the lost and the shamed and the ones in exile and the ones alone....this pursuit, our vocation, what we get up in the morning for...to pursue and find the lost ones, near and far...for the banquet has begun, and the meal is so fine...and the music beckons...and the dancing begins...no apologies, no excuses...only loving welcome....and welcome saves....and that, dear people of God, is something to celebrate.