

Lent IV Year

Those of you who have been listening me talk over the past fifteen years no doubt know by now that Luke's gospel is of the genre called rhetoric. Rhetoric was the literary art coined by the Greek academy... the art of persuasion... Rhetoric is the artful use of language to compel the listener to do something. Not only is it meant for intellectual stimulation and awareness, but it is meant to move people to action.... The power of words to persuade...

It is redundant... but we'll call our gospel reading for today, a rhetorical parable... a story meant to awaken the imagination and move one to action....The so-called 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 jaded with it. But still the story is a theological icon in modern western Christianity....It has come to embody the highly western and Calvinistic notion of repentance necessary for salvation...the cosmic quid pro quo, as it were (if I do this, I get that)...the poor miserable repentant sinner come home at last; In Calvinism we are meant to identify with the younger son... You know, 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 tele-evangelists add cars and houses and bank

accounts to the list....It fits with our American ethos...the myth of the unredeemed exile, Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*; Ishmael, in Melville's *Moby Dick*, Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*, 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 and sentimentalized...it has become something of a platitude....a short formulaic tableau as to the grace of God...the quid pro quo of so-called being saved. And my premise as you know is that salvation in modern western Christianity has become intensely personal... about my going to heaven or not.

I hope today we might find the rhetorical force that is alive in this text.... First of all, you remember that Luke's primary theme, laid out in Mary's Song in the prologue of this gospel, is the theme of reversal, the revolutionary re-ordering of the way of things; a re-ordering socially, economically, and politically: the poor raised up to dignity, and the powerful rich dethroned. That is the over-arching context of the narrative action of this story that only appears in Luke...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, not that those aren't good things, but it is concerned with salvation, and not salvation as something personal, but salvation as communal.... So let's look again at this

rich narrative...Jesus has just been accused by the scribes and Pharisees...the religious and civic establishment, of welcoming and eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors, the social outcasts of his day... 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... 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, just to make things real, as if we have to be told, we are shown that this family is dysfunctional...: dysfunctional family...Is there any other kind?...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's bad about that...Families in the ancient world stuck together out of necessity. 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.....so Luke is honing in on a sensitive and well known subject.... The parable is an intimate slice of life, taken from the everyday.

First we are told, that the younger son asks for his inheritance....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, we discover, is no ordinary patriarch.... And the neighbors would 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, for those who lose their wealth to gentiles, or marry a gentile... the shunning is called the qetsatsah...wherein the shamed one would wear a roughly woven robe, and his family and surrounding community would offer him a jar of ashes of 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...that ain't kosher from where he comes from...so he languishes in exile, lost and shamed and alone and starving; he is as isolated as one could be in this world....and we are told that he finally comes to himself....the Syriac version of this text translated from the ancient Aramaic, reads "he got smart".

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 of course...contriving his speech over and over in his mind...maybe just maybe he can use his naïve father one more time...the inevitable shunning notwithstanding....there is no repentance here, only self interested preservation.

And then our story picks up steam...the father spots the son far off down the road and runs to meet him...according to social tradition, men of station do not run in public....women may, but men may not...so the father runs like a woman to greet his lost son now found...and before the son can get a sentence out of his concocted plea, 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 conventional

shunning... 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... one who was dead, and now alive... and it is something to celebrate...

And then there's the older son, the one I identify with, and perhaps you do too, the one who has stayed dutifully in the family business, followed the rules, honored the customs, and he is appalled, perhaps rightly, at this over the top celebration for this one who has brought shame onto 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... social boundary after social boundary shattered..... Impetuous compassion crossing boundaries, smoothing rough places and raising up valleys, as it were..... the audience now find themselves in the tableau... the younger son, he is the sinner and tax collector, the marginalized, the disenfranchised... the older brother, the scribe and Pharisee, the socially and morally acceptable and conventional... and the father, an icon of

compassion, pursuing both sons with all that he is to reconcile them in this community that glows inside the house, alive with music and dance... God's eschatological feast breaking into the conventions of our world...the aroma of veal chops, medium rare, with olive oil and thyme, a little garlic...but I digress.

This of course is another story that depicts Love's pattern... a piece of rhetoric calling us to love... love that restores and reconciles....This is a story about our responsibility as the faithful to Love as God Loves; that Love cannot be contained or stunted by our illusory conventions... Love has no conditions. It cannot be contained....Love will not rest until all are at table, and Love will break boundaries if necessary. Love will improvise to get Love's way...Most commentators say that the father in this story is God, a god who loves unconditionally... But I say the father in this story is the father.... The one who chooses to Love as God Loves. That means that we are the protagonists of this story. It is a vision of our true nature, our true humanity... and the teaching here is that Love bears no resentments. Love never shuns, but only embraces. The father would be justified in the moral tradition to reject his young wayward son; but that is not what Love does.

This is first and foremost a story about compassion.... The human gift that transforms our world... compassion, the human vocation that swings

open the door between heaven and earth... *This is a story about us, brothers and sisters... This is a story about the people of God... We are the protagonist in the high drama of faith.... The people of God being, not people first about creeds and dogma and convention, and erudite theology... This is a story about living in empathy with the suffering of others... that is what the word compassion means... to suffer with.... To bear up the suffering of our world in compassion is to bear the very love of God..... and such acts of sacrifice ramify, ramify exponentially... change things... And it is compassion, the alchemy of Incarnation... It is compassion that is the very process of love itself.

This is another reversal for Luke... He has spoken of the economic reversal... the poor being filled with good things and the greedy sent away empty... Here he is reversing social convention as well... There are no outcasts... the Law and the social codes of exclusion notwithstanding....

This ain't Calvin folks...there is no mention of repentance in this story...there is no mention of forgiveness.....but this story is about one who is brought into God's gracious favor through lavish welcome and generous hospitality without judgement...and that is what we call grace...the older brother in his self-sufficiency and 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 and restoration of the community, a renewal in microcosm of the created order...the younger son is not the protagonist here... nor the older....It is us... We are at the heart of this story.... We are sent in compassion on a quest for reconciliation and wholeness....reconciliation, what God lives for....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 pleading....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....He like a mother running for her child will not cease her labor....will not cease no matter what convention says....and therefore it is for us to plead as well.....As the baptized we are protagonists for the good...we are the ones, for God's sake, who must pursue the lost and the shamed and the ones in exile and the ones alone.... Those who are dead in this life....This pursuit, our vocation of compassion, is what makes us truly human...So let us run to meet them on the road, all of them the dead...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 invitation and welcome...and welcome is salvation...and that, dear people of God, that is something to celebrate indeed.