

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the Lake
The Fourth Sunday in Lent, year 'C'
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The story of Cain and Abel, in which the older of two brothers is the one who is wicked and the younger one is wronged, is unique among the scriptures. In other stories, it's the younger brother who's the scoundrel and schemer. Isaac inherits his father Abraham's covenant while his older brother Ishmael is exiled. Jacob tricks his Father into giving him his brother Esau's birthright and blessing. Joseph arranges for his youngest son Ephraim to receive Jacob's blessing rather than Manasseh, his eldest—and so on.

So this story of the so-called Prodigal Son appears to continue the tradition. The younger scheming son asks his father to divide the inheritance so he can go and live as he wishes. Now this may not sound radical to us, but in the ancient world, the elder son would normally receive a two-thirds share with the remaining third divided among the other sons. In other words, this parable presents us with a situation where the younger son is getting more than he deserves.

It's the third in a series of parables Jesus tells in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel. The first concerns the lost sheep, the second the lost coin, and the third the lost son. In the first two, someone goes searching for that which was lost and, when it is found, everyone is invited to a great party. But here, the one who has lost something—the father who's lost his son to a life of debauchery and wastefulness—doesn't seek at all. In fact, he gladly lets his son go. It's the son who comes back, seeking restoration—which is freely given along with the obligatory celebration.

I think the first two parables are easy to understand. Jesus is talking about the extravagance—and even foolishness—of God who goes to great lengths to restore that which is his own. But this third parable presents us with a different situation. Not only does the father not seek his lost son, but the lost son also doesn't seem to be very sorry. He simply goes home because he's broke and hungry. His speech, "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son,'" rings hollow. It's the kind of false apology children have been making to their parents since time began—apologies which parents know to be disingenuous but which they nonetheless accept, if for no other reason than that they love their children.

Usually this parable is talked about in terms of how it illustrates the unconditional love of God—despite the fact that the father doesn't do anything to find his son. And that doesn't jibe with the Incarnation, with a God who not only sought out his children, but even became one of them in order that they might be restored. Nor does the son—who makes a half-hearted act of contrition—commend itself to us who are called, in

the majestic language of the Prayer Book, to truly and earnestly repent of our sins. So something else is going on. And that something else is found in the older son's response to this whole episode.

We're told tantalizingly little about the older brother, but we know he is obedient and dutiful. He's done what's been asked of him and has lived up to expectations. It must have been galling for him to see his brother get more than his fair share and to go off to a life of adventure. And now that he's come home, he hasn't even gotten his comeuppance. Quite the opposite: he's been given a new wardrobe, some expensive jewellery, and big welcome home party. It isn't fair. But life, of course, isn't fair. And that stark truth can be the cause of much pain and anger in your lives and in mine.

Now, when I say that life isn't fair. The unfolding horror in Ukraine shows us just how terribly unfair life can be. But I'm not thinking about that kind of random unfairness—or even disease and disaster. I'm thinking of the unfairness of doing the right things, getting good grades, working hard, being diligent and sensible only to find out that none of this makes a difference. Someone who has none of the qualities needed for a highly desirable position gets the post over dozens of highly qualified candidates. A brilliant musician languishes in relative obscurity while lesser talents play Carnegie Hall. Someone with average intelligence gets into the Ivy League simply because he's a legacy.

It can be extremely difficult to accept not getting what we think we deserve, to discover that it's the younger brother everyone loves, whom everyone makes excuses for, who always lands on his feet. But brooding on these perceived injustices—despite the fact that it feels good to brood—only serves to make us bitter and twisted and withdrawn.

My dear friends, it's undeniably true that you and I often strain to find peace in what we perceive to be great injustice and unfairness. There's no doubt that many of us struggle with how we can live out our Christian vocation in a church in which too many people lacking gravitas and character are in positions of leadership. There's no doubt that the temptation to give up and join the folks on the golf course is extremely powerful. There's no doubt that there are many reasons to sulk in solitary self-righteousness. There's no doubt that sometimes God's ways are often baffling, and we strain to understand why certain things happen—or don't. There's no doubt that sometimes find ourselves estranged from him. The question is can we allow ourselves to be loved by God enough that his love can overcome our estrangement?

The Father in our parable comes out to his older son and pleads with him to come inside and join the party. He yearns for his sons to be reconciled to each other. Reconciliation doesn't erase the past, but it does enable us to leave our places of solitary self-righteousness so we can move into the future. That future is found inside with the others, at the banquet, over bread broken and wine outpoured. It's a banquet where we are given more than we could have ever dreamed of asking for, more than we deserve, more than our rightful inheritance, a banquet where we discover all that

is his is ours—including, incredibly, the people whose easy success and smug self-satisfaction drive us to despair. But if he can love them, how can we not?