

Sunday, March 31, 2019

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:15-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-12

No Matter What God Loves You!

Jesus was preparing his disciples for what he was going to experience in Jerusalem. Jesus continues to tell parables as a means of teaching right living. His longest and most detailed parable provides more questions than answers and yet we might even ask, has human nature even changed a little bit since that day Jesus told it? The answer is simply- no. For if we look to in the world there are still many who are greedy, hypocritical, self-centred, and yes wanting to be in charge and independent. Perhaps what we should be asking is where do we or you/I fit in? Most likely you could relate to either of the sons in the story. The story is often titled the prodigal son because of the younger son's return yet our focus today is on the father and his unconditional love.

Two brothers are similar= both self -absorbed, both choosing to be estranged from those who loved them and neither respectful of their father or each other. The loving father remained devoted to each child and he loved them enough to allow them the freedom to make their own decisions. His attitude toward them was determined by his character. He did not change his ways or standards, he remained loving to both.

The younger son request's for his inheritance before the father is dead was just not part of the Hebrew way of life yet when the father granted his child's request all stereotypes were shattered. At that time a wealthy father could execute his will before his death in order to retire from the business or spend more time playing golf. This would enable the children to take over the daily responsibilities. But those who heard Jesus speak would have considered this son's request as appalling! What was the son asking for? And Why? What was really going in that house of a wealthy farmer? He wanted 3 things 1. He wished for a lot of money- to with what he wanted.. 2. He wished to travel and see the world- with no chores, responsibilities. 3. He wished he could be his own boss- that is be independent.

As the younger son of a wealthy man- his life was prearranged—to work with his brothers and sisters to sustain the farm to providing food not only for themselves and their families but also for everyone in the community. He wanted something different and

more exciting and so by asking for the money he propelled himself into both geographic and psychological distancing. He wanted the money so he would not have to look after his parents as they aged and any unmarried sisters.

But what did he do? He spent the money on wild, riotous living, a life of debauchery, squandering his wealth in wild living, Yet is this behaviour any different than some people we know? Latest fashions, toys, trips, houses, cars, and the most possessions one can acquire? But this wealth did not include what was most important—familial, ethnic, and religious identity.

Then the money was gone! How would this son support himself? Jesus put the son in a foreigner's pigsty and this signified a total alienation of the faith and ultimate disgrace. He denied his faith and sunk very low as he wallowed with pigs and worked for a Gentile farmer. The younger son had hit rock bottom in his life. But was he really alone? God's Spirit was present with him and the Spirit heard his plea about keeping people close to him. At some point, "when he came to his senses" the young man had devised Plan B because Plan A sure was a disaster.?

We do not know whether his decision was based on destitution or moral remorse or whether it was to return home and scheme manipulation of his father or truly seek forgiveness. All that is known is that he knew that he would be better off working for his father than living in a pigsty. He hoped that he could be a hired servant, a day labourer who often lived on the verge of destitution but at least he would earn money in a respectful way. He started his journey home and as he walked he scripted his apology and practised and rehearsed his words eloquently.

Meanwhile as he is out in the field, the father sees someone walking towards the farm—it is his son. And running to him, he embraces the young man before anything is spoken. The father clasps his son in his arms. He is filled with compassion and he kisses him even though he smells like a pigsty. The young man is safe at home again and there is compassion and love that has no limits. At this point in the story there is limited discussion as to the role the son will have upon his return, because the father wants to celebrate his homecoming. A banquet is planned for later that day and there is much work and preparation to be done.

It is then that the story shifts to the hardworking stable older brother who learns in passing of the party that is happening. He is silent at first which seems to be reflective of his greed knowing that he owns the farm once his father dies, but instead of being the mediator or negotiator of the terms of the younger son's return, he becomes silent, angry and put out.

At the end of the parable, the older son finds his voice and there is contempt—there is no respectful 'Father/dad' or even my brother—he clearly has disengaged in the relationship with his brother, but he chooses not to be a part of the celebration. The father wanted him to serve as host and pretend that he was pleased at his brother's return. But he was bitter, jealous, angry and resentful—the father killed a fatted calf—an animal worth a lot of money at market and for what? To celebrate the brother's squandering of money? Yet this is why the focus of this story should not only be on the younger son's repentance, but the action of the father with both of his sons. For the father then speaks to the older son and says, "My son—acknowledging his loving relationship, he goes on: you are always with me and everything I have is yours/ But we had to celebrate and be glad because your brother was dead and is alive again—lost and found. Not only did the father have a party, but he reclothed him and restored his status as a beloved son—forgiven and loved unconditionally.

As we reflect on this parable the image of God is totally changed- Jesus rejects the image of God as judging, condemning and vengeful and makes the father have boundless love, limitless pardon and calls his children—all a part of his family. This parable revealed God as a divine attitude of forgiveness in advance that may seem indulgent and risky but restored what was lost to new life. When Jesus shared this story no doubt eyebrows were raised, eyes were in shock and people stared at the floor because of what he was saying was the need to repent of all sins—getting right with God- and then going forward in faith and love.

Like the father in the parable, God's arms are open wide and there is so much compassion that God even steps aside to console those who are hurting. But when the celebration reveals the faith and hope that everyone is called to have in God alone there is much rejoicing.

God's compassion is so profound that he goes beyond the normal rules in order to be reconciled to all of his children. God gave to us Jesus to preach, teach and heal. Jesus, the Son of God descended to earth to save, rescue and redeem all those who have turned away from God—for whatever reason and doing what they should not be doing, And it is God's compassion for the lost that brings about life out of death and that makes transformation possible in people's lives.

Transformation is possible in people's lives but individuals must choose the life they want for themselves just like the two sons. People must choose to live as Jesus taught in order to be forgiven. And to be forgiven means to be rid of the baggage of the old self and taking on a new self. This new self is able to be reconciled with God and through reconciliation a new relationship- a new bond is formed and there boundless hope! This hope lights the way and the way is the path of Christ, to the cross and the empty tomb. The difficult part in all of this—is knowing that no matter what we have done—all we need to do is confess it and God still loves us. He meets us where we are and opens his arms in compassion; he reveals Jesus to us and through Christ's death and resurrection we are set for life and eternal life. No matter what we do—God loves us if we truly believe and have faith we are loved unconditionally!