

WELCOME HOME

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 March 14, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

The 15th chapter of Luke has collected 3 stories about the lost – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost sons. The first verses of the chapter are important for understanding the parables. “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinner and eats with them.”

The Greek word for sin is hamartia – missing the mark. To the Pharisees and scribes it would be someone careless with the keeping of the law. But the sinners and Tax Collectors were beyond this concept. They willfully had broken the law and cultural standards. Tax collectors collected money for the Roman government. The Pharisees and scribes thought them outside the boundary of God’s love. God did not love them, would not even hear their prayers, much less forgive them.

It is important to understand that Jesus is telling this parable to the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus is not telling this parable to the lost. The Pharisees and scribes will in the end judge the importance of this parable.

There was a man who had two sons. Did he have daughters? Probably, but they did not really count. They would not receive any inheritance. Sons were the people who mattered. The younger son asks the father to give him the share of property that would be his one day. Scholars say these amounts to the son saying to his father, “Drop dead” because the property was not legally the sons until the father died. Notice that when the son asked his father to divide the property he began his request with the proper title of respect – Father. No one knows exactly the translation of the word for father – abba. My New Testament professor thought a good translation would be like the word a two year old would use to his father – “da-da”.

The younger son gathered what he could and went off to find about life – he went to a far country – like he went to Atlanta or New York. Too soon he ran out of funds and he squandered his property. Big trouble with his father. The property was not legally his to squander as long as his father was alive. The younger son has done more than bend the fender of the family car. He is in trouble with his father.

He is hungry and finally has to hire out to get some food. He is tending pigs. So, not only is he in trouble with his father he is in trouble with God. Jewish people do not have anything to do with pigs.

He came to himself. How does that happen. I have friends who had a son who spent a decade into drugs. They tried everything. Then, one day, he came to himself. He realized that he could not live his life in the drug scene. This younger son comes to himself. He has a plan. I will go home. My father won’t let me starve. I will say to him, “Father (The proper title of respect), I have sinned against you (Property) and against God (Pigs). I am not worthy to be your son. Take me back as a hired servant.” The scribes and Pharisees hearing this know that the boy is out of his mind. His father will not take him back. He will kill him.

But the father sees the son coming home. He goes out to greet and welcome him home. He tells the servants there will be a party. At a party in this day, the host would give several robes to guests, but one robe was given to the guest of honor. This returning son is to get that best robe. He is also to get a ring that will most likely enable him to buy and sell in his father's name. And he gets some sandals. In that day, only free people could wear shoes. A lot of free people didn't wear shoes because they could not afford them. But a slave had to be bare footed.

Now, isn't that a great story of welcome. That is the way God is with us. We know that state of being out of sorts and God welcomes us home. It is a strong word of God's care for the lost. That by itself is a great message for today.

But in the New Testament, if a parable has two parts, it is the second part that gets the emphasis.

The elder son comes in from the field and inquires about the festivities. He is told what has happened. He is angry and will not come in to the celebration. The father, just like with the younger son, goes out to meet him. The son begins his angry reply to his father with no title of respect. He does not address him, Father. He just blesses him out. The father tries to calm him with words that he need not worry. Things are not going to get divided up again. But his son was lost and is found. There needs to be a celebration.

Now, it is the task of the Pharisees to judge the action of the elder son. Was he right in his criticism of his father? I tell you, there is not one Pharisee or Scribe in that day who would have taken the side of the elder son. No matter the action of the father, the son would have not right, no ground to stand on, in his words to his father. He does not have the right to speak with his father in the manner or with the position of his thinking. The elder son is wrong. He is out of line.

Once the Pharisees and Scribes make this determination, we need to go back to the first verses of this chapter where they are grumbling about Jesus associating with the tax collectors and sinners. The point of the parable is that these scribes and Pharisees do not have the authority to decide who God loves and who God doesn't love. It is not up to them to draw a boundary around God's love. It is a strong message to the established religion of the day. They are not the keepers of God's love.

It is a strong message to the church today. The church does not have the right to say that because we don't serve communion the same way, some are wrong. Because we don't all baptize the same way, some are wrong. God's love is that gift of grace to all. We cannot push aside people of color. We cannot push away the gay and lesbian communities. "Who ever you are, where ever you are on life's journey, You are welcome." That is the calling of the church.

I would move it even beyond that. We Christians cannot say that God does not include Muslims. The Muslims cannot say God does not include the Buddhist.

Our text for today is a message of WELCOME HOME in the strongest language possible. God will not set boundaries to God's love. Welcome Home.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, working on the Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa wrote these words.

I HAVE A DREAM, GOD SAYS, PLEASE HELP ME REALIZE IT.

IT IS A DREAM OF A WORLD WHOSE UGLINESS AND SQUALOR AND POVERTY,

ITS WAR AND HOSTILITY, ITS GREED AND HARSH COMPETITIVENESS, ITS

ALIENATION AND DISHARMONY ARE CHANGED INTO THEIR GLORIOUS COUNTERPARTS; WHEN THERE WILL BE MORE LAUGHTER, JOY AND PEACE,

WHERE THERE WILL BE JUSTICE AND GOODNESS AND COMPASSION AND LOVE

AND CARING AND SHARING. I HAVE A DREAM THAT SWORDS WILL BE BEATEN

INTO PLOWSHARES AND SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS, AND THAT MY CHILDREN WILL KNOW THAT THEY ARE MEMBERS OF ONE FAMILY, THE HUMAN FAMILY, GOD'S FAMILY. MY FAMILY.