

**Texts: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15: 1-2, 11-32**

**This story that Jesus has just told us – the story of the Prodigal Son -- is one of the most familiar and favorite parables in all of the Bible... So why do we read it during Lent? Hold that thought while we examine this story a little more closely.**

**There are some interesting details in this story that are worth exploring. First, the younger son, let's call him Number 2 Son, asks his father to divide up his property and to give him the share that he would ordinarily inherit after the Father's death. That might not seem like such an odd request in this day and age, when parents help their children with college expenses and the like, but in Jesus' day this would have been unheard of. To divide property likely meant selling off part of the family's land. In an agricultural economy, ancestral ties to the land were vital. The younger son was insulting his father in two ways: first, his request meant that he wished his father were dead, and second, he was shaming his father by his insistence on getting the property.**

**But the Father does it. He gives No. 2 Son his inheritance without question. And off the young man goes, to the Biblical equivalent of "What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas." We can imagine this part of the story all too well, can't we? Sex, drugs and rock & roll, right? I like the way the King James Version puts it: "he wasted his substance with riotous living." Before too long, daddy's money runs out, his fickle friends desert him, and No. 2 son finds himself in dire straits. There's a famine in that land. He finds himself the only job he can, feeding pigs. And this is the second detail to pay attention to: No. 2 Son is not just the hired man as we would imagine that job. He has fallen as far as it is possible to get for a nice Jewish boy from a good home. He is feeding pigs – remember that it was**

**forbidden for Jews to eat or even to touch a pig. No. 2 Son is so hungry that he finds himself thinking that hog slop is looking pretty good to eat. He has hit bottom.**

**We know the story so well. No. 2 Son makes his way back home, rehearsing in his head what he is going to say to his father.**

**And now let's shift the scene to the father's home. Luke tells us that while No. 2 Son is still far away, his father saw him coming down the road. I imagine that the Father has been scanning the horizon every single day since his son left, looking for him to come back, waiting and hoping for him to come back home.**

**At this point, let's remember that this parable comes after two other familiar stories of lost and found in Luke's gospel. First Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind to look for one sheep that has gone astray. And then he tells the story of a woman who cleans her house from top to bottom to find a single silver coin that she has lost. We didn't read those stories this morning, but I bet you know them. They tell about God searching out something that has been lost, something that might seem insignificant. When the shepherd finds the sheep, he calls his neighbors and friends to come over and celebrate. When the woman finds her coin, she calls her neighbors and friends to come over and celebrate. So God, who plays the part of the Father in this story, searches daily for his lost son. Isn't a son worth more than a sheep? Isn't seeing the boy you thought was dead come walking home worth more than all the silver coins you can count? Jesus ups the ante in this story of the prodigal son.**

**The Father, who was put to shame by his son's demand for his property, throws all caution to the wind. He runs out to meet his boy. He embraces him and kisses him. He calls for the best robe to be brought, calls for a ring to be put on his son's finger – things of**

**honor for the son who has dishonored him. He calls for a party – kill the fatted calf! Bring on the music! Let’s dance! Our God’s response toward anyone – anyone! – who repents and comes back home, is to celebrate.**

**But the story isn’t quite over. No. 1 Son, the older brother, is not celebrating. And let’s be honest here. As much as you know how hard it is to confess your sins and to repent, as much as you know the relief of forgiveness, as much as you know the joy of being welcomed back home, don’t you understand the older brother’s point of view just as well?**

**Think about how you feel when you are standing in line, maybe at the movie theater or in an airport, and someone cuts in front of you. You know that resentment, right?**

**Haven’t you always followed the rules, driven the speed limit, handed in your assignments on time, done your chores, worked overtime at your job, volunteered your evenings and your weekends for the church, done the right thing? And here is your little brother, for goodness’ sake, the one who shamed your father, squandered the money, and left home – and he gets the party thrown for him when he doesn’t deserve it. He doesn’t deserve any of it.**

**That’s the hard part about reconciliation, isn’t it? We want the other person to get what they deserve. Listen to No. 1 Son keep score: “All these years I’ve been working like a slave for you.” Listen to his resentment: “I have never disobeyed your command.” Listen to his bitterness: “You have never even given me a young goat so that I can celebrate with my friends.” In his anger, No. 1 Son forgets the life of grace and plenty that he lives with his Father. All that he has, all that he has been given, feels like nothing. Jesus had a term for that kind of thinking. He called it “setting your mind on human things rather**

than divine things.” Paul had a term for it as well. He called it “regarding each other according to the flesh, rather than according to the Spirit.”

It’s the zero-sum game of comparison. It’s thinking in terms of scarcity. It’s trying to prove that everyone should get what they deserve. If No. 2 Son gets the party and the forgiveness, then there is that much less for No. 1 Son. But that’s not the way God works. Does any of us deserve the grace we have been given, the forgiveness we have been offered? Every time God’s active, searching, healing, grace-drenched love finds someone and brings them home, it does not mean that there is less of that love for the rest of us. It means that there is more. There is always more.

Because as long as even one person is lost, the rest of us are incomplete. As long as any one of God’s children is cast aside, broken, at the bottom, God will be out there searching. God will never stop searching for the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost brother, calling out with joy when they are found. God will never stop running down the road to meet the prodigal son, the prodigal daughter. God will never stop celebrating that even one person has come back home.

I recently read an interview with a Jesuit priest named Father Greg Boyle. Father Greg founded an organization in Los Angeles called Homeboy Industries that works with ex-gang members and ex-cons. Father Greg welcomes these folks, helps them learn job skills, provides counseling services, classes in parenting and anger management, gives them a sense of value and worth and hope. And this is how Father Greg talks about Jesus:

“We operate as if there are people who are monsters...people out there who don’t belong to us. Ask Jesus to identify somebody who doesn’t belong to us, you’re going to get a big fat zero. Jesus will not be able to come up with a name.”

So let's go back to the question at the very beginning of this sermon. Why do we read this story during Lent? Because it is about repentance and forgiveness, yes. Lent is a time to reflect on the ways that we fall short, and to turn back to God asking for forgiveness. But there is something more. At the very beginning of the Gospel reading, we hear the Pharisees and scribes complaining about Jesus, grumbling that "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Yes, he did. And yes, he does.

This is what I love about volunteering at Closer to Home. There is no one there who doesn't belong to us. Everyone is welcome. Lunch is free. And usually, it's a party, or at least a good conversation around the table. And I am certain that Jesus can be found at that table, eating and talking and laughing with those sinners who don't deserve a free lunch.

Just as he is here at this table. This man, this Jesus, this Son of God invites you to the feast. This man welcomes you, sinner, to the party. This man has given his very life so that you will have life. This parable, the story of the prodigal son, is about you and me and all the prodigal younger brothers and all the resentful older brothers, and all the tax collectors and all the fallen women and all the Samaritans and all the Pharisees and all the ex-gang members and all the folks who grew up in the church and all the folks who didn't. God has found you. God loves you. God welcomes you. No matter what.