



The Ring

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, II Corinthians 5:16-21

Fourth Sunday of Lent, Sunday, March 31st, 2019

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

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Text: But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand... (v. 22)

Humorist Garrison Keillor once said that “The Gospel is meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”¹

This gospel lesson is one of, if not the most familiar of Jesus’ parables. Almost everyone can identify with it - a father or mother who patiently waits for their son or daughter to “return to their senses”, the individual who squandered opportunities, the person who wonders about “fairness”.

Noted author, preacher, and scholar Barbara Brown Taylor observed that “the problem with a really good parable - especially one as beloved as this one - is that it can become “limp” from use. It becomes a kind of Velveteen Rabbit easily draped over a shoulder or cast aside.² I call this “taming” the gospel so that it neither harms nor challenges.

But, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not tame. We’ve been walking through Luke’s story of Jesus and from the very beginning we have been told that Jesus turns the world upside down. The gospel is about a reversal of fortunes; the haves become have nots and the have nots become haves. Those clothed in the purple splendor of this world will find themselves in a place of torment in the Next while the forgotten and neglected Lazaruses of this world find themselves nestled in the loving bosom of Father Abraham in the Next.

The late Fred Craddock³ said that this parable (the Prodigal Son) has been embraced by many people “who have not felt the full impact of the offence of grace that it dramatically conveys.” I will repeat that because I want you to wrap your head around what I just said. *This parable has been embraced by people “who have not felt the full impact of the offense of grace it dramatically conveys.*

The parable of the Prodigal is the third of three parables that Jesus used when he responded to the criticism of the Pharisees and keepers of the Law when they questioned the nature of his ministry and the he company he kept. He welcomed tax collectors and sinners, the riff-raff and unclean, the misfits and nobodies.

¹ A variation of Finley Peter Dunne’s

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Homeleticsonline*, quoted from the sermon “The parable of the dysfunctional family, preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, March 18, 2007.

³ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, John Knox, c. 1990, p. 186

The first parable was of a man who had 100 sheep. One of them wandered off so he left the 99 to go find it. This is simply not good husbandry. It is foolish because by the time the shepherd found the one lost sheep the other 99 could have scattered in 99 different directions as they grazed. Yet, Jesus said, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous person who need no repentance. (vss. 4-9)

The second parable was about a lost coin. A woman searched high and low for one lost coin and called in her friends and neighbors to celebrate when it is found. *“Just so, I tell you,”* Jesus said, *“there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* (vss. 8-10)

So far, Jesus had not moved into the “discomfort zone”. He crossed into that territory with the parable of “The Prodigal.” Now a “prodigal” is someone who is “recklessly extravagant.” In his book, The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith, Timothy Keller believes that it is the father who is the true prodigal. He is the one who is reckless in giving his youngest son his inheritance. And he is the one who is reckless in begging his eldest son to rejoice in the return of his younger brother. The only thing important to the father is “relationship”; relationship with each of his sons and his sons with each other. Whether this is a reconciliation between the brothers we don’t know, nor will we ever know. Jesus left the parable open ended. Maybe he did this because it is up to us to right the story. After all, our epistle lesson this morning told us that God *“reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.”* (vss. 19-20)

The eldest son was concerned with justice and fairness. In his youngest brother he saw someone who squandered a seemingly once in a lifetime opportunity. He wanted his brother to suffer the consequences, after all, he made his bed; now he should sleep in it. But instead, he is received by the father as if nothing ever happened, all was forgiven, all was forgotten. Where is the justice in that? Where is the fairness?

I had a conversation not too long ago with a child about fairness. It was unfair that because a few students acted up that the whole class was punished. It is unfair in the military that just because one member of a unit messes up that the whole unit is disciplined. It is unfair that because one player on a team doesn’t perform that the whole team has to run laps. I told the child that life is full of things that are “unfair” but when we spend our time looking for “fairness” we are walking on the thin ice of victimhood. We need to play the cards that we are dealt not wish for a different or better hand.

A few days ago I walked back from our Study Buddy program. I was taken aside and told of some family situations that are not fair to the children; neglect, troubled parents and siblings, abuse, getting caught in the net of the social services “system”. And I thought to myself, where is the fairness in any of these children’s home life. Or for that matter, where is the fairness that I was born in the United States to loving parents who sacrificed much so that I could be better off than they were while another

child is born into a different family or even a different country; into a home in a neighborhood where children cannot go outside to play because of gunfire or into a home where food is used as a weapon and famine is rampant?

But here is the real scandal of this lesson. It is the ring. Scholars debate what kind of ring it was. Based on the other parables that preceded this parable AND based on the context that it is in response to the criticism of the Pharisees and keepers of the Law, I suspect that the ring was the father's signet ring. In other words, total restoration. There is no reason to think that when the father died that the younger son would not get his portion of the inheritance as if nothing had ever happened. As God said through the prophet Isaiah, "*I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.* (43:25)

No wonder the elder son was upset. It wasn't fair. This is the offense of grace; it isn't fair. But then, if it was fair, it wouldn't be grace, would it?!

Now, here's the question: Are you okay with this offensive grace? If your not then older brother and you have a lot in common. It's something to think about.

Amen.