

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
Date: 3/6/16
Season: Lent 4
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

A few weeks back, 25 men of St. Thomas made their way out to St. Andrews House on Hood Canal for a retreat. We ranged in ages from our mid-thirties to, well, no older than that. Some of us were just establishing ourselves; others were in mid-career and beginning to look around and wonder if the path they had chosen was the most fulfilling path for them; still others were looking at life from the perspective of retirement, with all its satisfactions and occasional longings.

And this group of men came ready for work. Ready to deepen their spiritual paths, ready to engage new friendships, ready to listen and to learn. And so we did. Led by Tom Cashman and Jonathan Miller, our theme for the weekend was the story of the Lost Son – the Prodigal Son.

It's a familiar one, isn't it? The second son, barely of age, brashly demanding his inheritance – half of everything his dear father possesses – and then he sets out for Vegas, where he blows it all. He's then reduced to the most degrading condition possible for a Jew – feeding slops to the pigs and eating pig slop himself. In desperation or remorse, it's not really clear which, he sets out for home, ready to ask his father to take him on as a hired hand. But when he's still a ways distant, his father spots him and, we're told, "filled with compassion" runs to his son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him. The son apologizes, but it's almost as if his father doesn't hear him as - in his excitement – he calls servants and tells them to dress his lost son properly and get ready for a big party. The son who had been lost has now been found.

Everyone rejoices – everyone, that is, except for the dutiful older brother, the one who had dutifully stayed home, dutifully worked the ranch, dutifully done what he was supposed to do. And he's furious when his no-count little brother gets a party – a party he's never had. "What the heck" – or something like that – he says to his father. "I've worked like a slave for you – never disobeyed your commands – and you've never thrown a party for me." His father's response is a classic. "Son, you are **always** with me. **All** that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate because that brother of yours was dead and has come back to life."

You know, I've often thought that we should call this the Parable of the Self-Righteous son, because the story is at least as much about number 1 son as it is about number - and how the father relates to each of them.

Look at the context. Jesus tells this story to the religious authorities who were self-righteously criticizing him because he was eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners – with outcasts like son No.2. And the parable of the lost son is actually the third story Jesus tells in response to his self-righteous audience – the ones who look a whole lot like son No. 1. He first tells them the story of the lost sheep – how the owner of the sheep searches desperately for the one that's lost while leaving the 99 sheep to fend for themselves. There's much rejoicing when that one lost sheep is found, and then Jesus drives home the point to the self-righteous religious authorities when he says, "I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who think they need no repentance."

Get it? Even the righteous, not to mention the self-righteous, need repentance – which means an acknowledgement of their brokenness – an acknowledgement of their need for God. The second story he tells the unrepentant religious authorities is about a woman who loses one of her 10 silver coins. She searches high and low for it even though she already has plenty left over – 9 other coins, after all. She rejoices when she finds it and Jesus tells the unrepentant religious authorities that "there is joy in the presence of God over one sinner who repents." And then he tells the story of the lost son, or the story of the self-righteous, unrepentant son.

Of course, the main actor in all these stories is God. The God who searches so diligently for the one lost sheep, the God who searches diligently for the one lost coin. The God who runs to greet the lost son – and here's an interesting point – even before the returning son can express any repentance or remorse **at all**. Hold that thought.

Now back to our Men's Retreat. Our leaders invited us to live out the story of the lost son in various ways throughout the weekend. Asking ourselves questions about how to live as a man – a faithful man – in a world puts so much emphasis on material success and power. How to live as a faithful spouse or partner and father in a world that pays lip service to those roles but really celebrates prestige and accomplishment above all else. How, as a man, to build relationships and friendships amidst the demands of a very stressful world. And how to deepen and enrich or maybe even discover faith in the midst of an over-scheduled life.

What I found so impressive and so moving from almost the moment we arrived is how brave and how willing to be vulnerable and honest our men were. There were very few protective barriers that I noticed. Instead there was longing for depth and for

connection with one another and connection with the divine energy that was so obviously present among us.

This vulnerability and honesty were called out of us all through the weekend as we reflected on the Lost Son. We began by acting out the drama. Theron Eichenbeger played the younger son, Jim Hughes, the older son, Dick Rogers, the Father, and Arne Hendrickson the servant. Each character was dressed in an appropriate cloak and staff and I must say our actors played their roles brilliantly. We then broke out into small groups and shared with each other which of the characters we were resonating with in that moment. I say “in that moment” because if you stop and think about it, we carry all of these characters around inside ourselves. There are plenty times when I’m the younger, irresponsible son who’s wasted his gifts and who is in need of his father’s forgiveness. And there are plenty of times when I’m the duty-bound older brother, doing everything I’m supposed to do and wondering why I’m not more appreciated for it. And there are certainly times when God calls out my true self when I’m the loving, compassionate father who is able to offer mercy and forgiveness with no expectation of anything in return. Check this out for yourself. When do you recognize one of these characters in you?

So we lived with these characters in various contexts throughout the day on Saturday, letting each one of them speak to us, and sharing with each other what was being called for from us. Our failures, our places of shame and regret. Our places of healing and forgiveness and being forgiven. Our expressions of love and compassion and mercy and acceptance in the face of hurt and betrayal – our own and others.

Then on Saturday night, we all gathered in the chapel where the original drama had been acted out. The costumes of each of the characters were set out, and Tom and Jonathon invited each man to take a turn putting on the costume of the character with whom he was resonating in that moment and to ask for affirmation of a particular quality of that character which was being recognized inside the self. For example, one of our brothers put on the cloak of the younger son and said something like “I am the younger son. I ask for forgiveness and healing and I affirm my desire to amend my life.” Another man put on the cloak of the older brother and said something like, “I am the older brother. I am responsible and do my duty. Yet I long to be free and to play and love without feeling guilty.” Yet another man put on the cloak of the father and said something like, “I am the father. I care for and provide for my family without expecting anything in return. I love them beyond measure.” Now many deeply personal things were said by many of our men and I’m obviously not going to repeat those here. After each man spoke, we were invited, as we felt called to do so, to step up to the man, place our

hands on his shoulders and say, “Brother, I affirm you,” in whatever was being asked for. The lines in front of each man were long. And this all took a couple of hours. But what courage and what insights. It was clear to me that in fact we had explored almost every nook and cranny of the story. I was particularly moved by some of our learnings about the father and the older son which I’m quite sure was one of the points Jesus was making to his audience of scribes and Pharisees. And that is that notwithstanding the dutiful, rule-following older son’s aggrieved self-righteousness the Father loved him in equal measure to the younger son. “You have always been with me. All I have is yours,” says the Father to the older son. The fullness of the Father’s love is for the repentant, for sure. That’s the point of the first two stories Jesus told them. But it’s also for those who have **not yet** come to repentance. We aren’t told whether the younger son repented or not. We just know he was hungry and desperate. And the older son thought in his arrogance he wasn’t in need of repentance. Yet the Father was there for him too. The Father’s love encompassed them both and the Father’s love didn’t depend on their behavior!

Which of these characters resonates with you today? Many of us will surely identify with the dutiful older son – doing all that he’s supposed to do and yet – well, not being treated fairly. As if God is a divine CPA, balancing the books, making adjustments finely calibrated to reward or punish our behavior. Not at all. Our notions of fairness or unfairness seem to be unimportant in the divine scheme. If you stop and think about it that’s actually a relief. I mean, I thank God every day that I **don’t** get what I deserve. And in the end, remember, the Father tells the oldest son “Everything – everything – I have is yours.”

You may be resonating with the younger son this morning. You might be filled with remorse or guilt or shame. Feeling like your only fit for dining with the pigs. But the loving Father knows better. No matter what you **think** you deserve – punishment, banishment, all the stories we feel ourselves about how bad we are – the loving Father knows better. He runs to meet us with outstretched arms when we are far off – when we feel distant and separated and not worthy of love. It’s just in those moments that we see him. Amen.