

“Meeting Christ in Our Everyday Lives:  
In Our Times of Duty”  
Philippians 3:1-11  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32  
The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

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*Introduction to Scripture:*

We continue our series for Lent on the places we meet Christ: in wilderness, in wealth and success, in random suffering. Today, in our experiences of duty.

Before I read this familiar passage on the prodigal son, a little bit of background.

The context is disagreement at table fellowship. In Jesus’ time, scholar Luke Timothy Johnson reminds us, who ate what with whom animated and divided people in much the same way that sexual issues animate and divide people today. Pharisees and scribes, those who maintained ritual and legal purity, took great offense that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners, people who did not. This tension continued in early Christianity.

Remember that the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are a two-volume set; much of Acts has to do with the scandal that Gentiles were invited into worshiping the Jewish God, Yahweh, without first having to become Jews ... simply because they now had access through Jesus Christ.

The other thing I want to say about the context of this passage is this: the impact of this story is clearer if we remember the patriarchal family patterns of the Middle East. The paterfamilias is the revered tribal leader. All reliable social structure hinges on this. Economic interactions are made through him, marriage arrangements are made through him, and community conflicts are solved when the patriarchs gather at the city gate.

The father in this story should be accorded the utmost respect. So when the younger son asks him for his inheritance, it is *enormously* offensive; he’s publicly wishing his father dead. Then when the younger son runs off to another country, he’s disregarding his duty, he’s tossing away his identity (which is given through his family), and he’s again publicly humiliating his father. Then when he squanders his father’s money on loose living, and works in the fields feeding pigs (remember, he’s *Jewish*), he further disgraces his family. Finally, he has the *chutzpah* to come back to his father, with his self-serving appeal to be taken back in.

Now, for his father to come running out of the house, throwing his arms around him and welcoming him back in – *before* he has a chance to explain himself or offer any contrition – is scandalous. The father is not acting like any patriarch of that time would ever, ever, ever behave. He humiliates himself in front of the whole village. To a lesser extent, but just as notably, the father humiliates himself again when the older son refuses to come in. He goes out again, he pleads with his older son, and begs him to come in. This, my brothers and sisters, is no ordinary father.

Now listen for the word of God as it comes to us ... Luke 15:1-3, 11-32.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable:

There was a man who had two sons (and right away you know there is going to be trouble). The younger of them said, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So, he did the unthinkable, he divided his property between them. A few days later, the younger son gathered all that he had and traveled as far away from Dad as he could get, to a distant country. And there he squandered his property, that is, all of his father's hard earned wealth in dissolute living.

When he had spent everything and probably rung up credit besides, a severe famine took place throughout that country and he began to be in need. Fancy that! So he went and he hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. He would have gladly filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, but for the first time in his life, no one gave him anything.

And then he came to himself. He said, "how many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare and here I am dying of hunger? I'll get up and go to my father and I'll say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you I am no longer worthy to be called your son, treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set out and he went to his father.

While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion and he ran and he put his arms around him and he kissed him. Then, the son said to him "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you I am no longer worthy to be called your son" but before he could spit out these words, the father said to his servants, "Quickly, bring out a robe, the best one, and put it on him, put a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet, and get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

And if the story ended here, wouldn't it be happy? But the elder son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked him what was going on. He replied, "your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf because he's got him back safe and sound." And then he became angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and began to plead with him, but he answered his father - he doesn't say father, even the younger son says father - he just says, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for

him.” And the father said to him, “Son. Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. That we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours, was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and has been found.” This is the Word of the Lord.

I know there are exceptions, but my guess is that in this room, a good 95% of us are more like the older son than the younger son in this story. We work hard. We are responsible. We come to church, we give generously, we serve on committees and boards, we are leaders in our community. And I have to say, I like that about us. Oh, some 90s-style entitlement has crept in – it can’t be helped – but for the most part, the narcissistic, me-first, heck with everybody else, do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t hurt others mentality flew right over the good people of First Presbyterian Church, Lake Forest, and I for one am grateful. We get it about how the older son feels.

One of my friends in ministry, Michael Lindvall, is pastor of Brick Church in New York, and he once took the liberty of re-writing the second half of the parable in a way much more to their liking. It goes like this: the younger son decides to come home, and “while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him through the window of the house. He remained at his writing table until his son was brought into him. He greeted his son with grim countenance, crossing his arms [over his chest.]

And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. And the father said to his servants, ‘quickly take him into the fields and there he shall toil side by side with his faithful brother for forty days until he proves himself worthy to be a son of mine.’ And after these forty days, the elder brother came and drew near to the house and his father ran and embraced and kissed him.

The elder brother said to his father, ‘This son of yours has indeed grown in spirit during these forty days of hard labor in the fields. And his father said to his older son, ‘Son, if you think your brother is truly repentant, I would desire to put the best robes on you both, and shoes on your feet, and rings on your hands. My son, let us bring the fatted calf and kill it and let us all make merry, for this your younger brother was dead and is alive, was lost and is found. And the older son said, ‘Let me ponder the matter of such a banquet, father; perhaps after another forty days it would be fitting to kill the fatted calf.’”

This is more like it. It’s not that we want a mean and vindictive God, we just want a God who is fair. And it is scandalous to us still that God is so generous, so obscenely forgiving. Lindvall notes that “Judaism, even Pharisaic Judaism, made plenty of room for those who confessed their sins to be forgiven and welcomed home. But what’s with the running, the embrace before confession is ever offered? What’s with the royal treatment? ... It’s the extravagance, the very eagerness of this grace that scandalizes, not so much the grace itself. The sharp point is God’s restless, tireless, limitless love for all, all, *all* of God’s children, even, perhaps especially, loose-living younger sons, tax collectors, sinners, Gentiles, whoever, whoever, *whoever*.”

God isn't fair. God is obscenely loving. For those who have been lost, this is really good news. For anyone who has been lost in narcissism or addictions or gambling or rage or eating disorders or cutting or adultery or anything else in all creation that separates us from the love of God, you know deep in your bones that this is good news. You know how wretched you were; you know that you couldn't have saved yourself; you know that you didn't deserve or earn your way home; you know that it is simply by the grace of God that you live and breathe another day; you know the power of unmerited grace. And if any of you here today are still lost in the far country, I want to say to you clearly and simply, "come home." Just as you are, no magic formula to say, no acts of penitence to do, just come home. God welcomes you back with open arms, and I or any of the pastors would love to talk with you after worship or any time this week. You do not have to punish yourself any more. God's heart is here for you.

But for those who are dutiful, we can't help it. The wretched excess of God's grace, it will never make sense, and it still stings. And this is what I want to say to you – to us – today. Jesus is preaching this parable to us, to offer us a love that would save us from proving ourselves anymore. That would save us from the temptations of pride and anger and resentment. That would save us most of all from, as one pastor says it, the most dangerous pitfall of rectitude: "our desire that [God] our father should love us because we deserve to be loved, our hope that he would love us because we were loyal and worked hard and did the right thing from the beginning. ... It is the strange gospel truth that we are loved, not because we deserve it, thank God, but because love is who God is. It's not fair, it's better than fair." (cite Lindvall).

What the older son doesn't understand, that we so desperately need to understand, is that duty is not for the sake of earning love. Love, real love, can never be earned. Duty – in its best and purest form – duty is a form of *expressing* love. Duty is for the sake of the relationship. Duty, responsibility, is offered out of the deepest respect and affection for our God, because we already *know* we are loved. Because we know there is nothing more God could give us than the staggering compassion that we are already given.

That's what St. Paul is trying to say in his letter to the Philippians: I was a perfect Pharisee, a model Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, zealous for God, blameless in the law. My credentials are impeccable, my vita burnished, my duty and righteousness complete. And then what does he say? "All of this – *all* of this, I count as loss because of Christ ... because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

And if our relationship with God is the point, then what is there not to share with the younger son, with everyone, with anyone who wants a relationship with God through Jesus Christ our Lord? That's what the father says to his older son, isn't it? "Son, *you are always with me*, and all that is mine is yours." Can you not rejoice that your younger brother has come home to relationship too?

I don't know. Maybe a story is the only way I can say it. The power of this came to me just last month when my parents moved back up here to be near us. Mom and Dad had retired from Mt.

Prospect twenty years ago, and moved down to Arkansas. Last month they moved back up here to Glenview, and we couldn't be more glad. John and I worked hard to make them welcome. We emptied out half of our basement to make room for their extra stuff. We cleared out a huge space in our garage to store stuff for my sister to take when she gets a chance. We opened our guest room to them for as long as they needed it so that they had time to settle in to their apartment.

They and their stuff arrived at our house on a Tuesday. On Wednesday Mom and Dad and I went early in the morning to meet the moving van at their apartment; the movers arrived at 8. It was hard, hard work, finding places for all their boxes in their place; we were constantly moving things around; it was intense. Mom couldn't help much; she has some early dementia and is simply not capable of organizing things anymore.

Now at 10:30, my brother Mike arrives. Mike lives in Crystal Lake; he's a great guy, a wonderful brother and terrific son. He has taken half the week off work so he can help Mom and Dad. But I've got to tell you, when I've been busting my fanny since early in the morning, I thought maybe he could have hurried his own butt over there a little sooner. But still, it's fine. I'm glad, truly glad he's there.

Until Mom takes me aside. Now with dementia, one of the first things that happens is that the inhibitors go. The screens and filters we have to protect peoples' feelings aren't there any more. So she pulls me aside. "Chris, isn't it wonderful that your brother is here? Mike is so special. He's just wonderful." And she's just beaming.

I'm like "Yeah, Mom", and I go to find another box, and she knows I'm blowing her off. So she pulls me aside again, and she's got to make this point and I've got to receive it. "Chris," as if she has not said this to me, short term memory is the other thing to go, "Chris, your brother is here. Isn't Michael wonderful? He took off time from his job so he could be here with us and help us. Isn't he wonderful?"

I have to tell you, for the first time in my life, I really got it about the older brother in this story. And I thought, "my brother did not run away from home, he did not squander the family's inheritance, he did not humiliate my parents, he's a perfectly good man." And still, still, I am angry and jealous because Mom loves him. Now I know my Mother loves me, and I know my Father loves me, it's not even that I am unappreciated. But I got it, about hard it is, how hard it is not to feel like you have a right, not to feel like you've earned a place, not to feel like you deserve love.

And then I got something else. You see, John's parents are both dead. John's Dad died when he was eleven years old. His mom died suddenly when she was just sixty-five. His parents are both dead. And I have my parents. And they live near me now, and I can be with them anytime.

Thank God! Thank God I could get it! What matters here is not earning my parent's love and affection. What matters is that we have the grace of relationship. And the more siblings who can come home, the better. It's not about our nuclear families. It's not about how we treat our parents, or our siblings, or even our kids for that matter.

The parable is about God and is about us....that we get to be in relationship with God, all the time....all the time. We who were far off, and we who never wandered away. We are equally blessed. Abundantly, outrageously blessed by a God who loves us, not because of anything we've done, thank God, but because, simply because, Love is who God is. Thanks be to God. Amen.