

4th Sunday in Lent at St James – Notes on a Message by Rev. Dr. Rod Spidahl, March 10, 2013

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Part I -Introduction to Parables What is their purpose for us? How do we hear them? What follows on this first page is an attempt to explain the larger picture of how we hear Scripture and form opinions about God . . . if this gets boring, just jump to the next page (Section II on the parable itself).

The early church drew its life and faith from the parables. Galen, a non-Christian, wrote in AD 140, “Christians, drawing their faith from parables . . . are acting in a keen pursuit of justice . . . not inferior to the genuine philosophers”

Later, parables became a source of ethics but not faith (theology), largely due to the over-use of allegory, by which people inserted all sorts of strange meanings into the parables. Allegory misused in the parable for today might focus on the fatted calf as “representing” being Christ, because it was brought and killed but this tends to hijack the story and cause us to miss the Fatherly compassion. Besides, this is not a sin sacrifice but a celebration of homecoming. It is unavoidably true that Jesus used metaphor in and through story to create a picture but it is a house with many rooms, not just one meaning . . . curiously, he did not use a reasoned logic. We could call him a metaphorical theologian as opposed to a doctrinal or confessional one.

Our theology in the US and Europe is largely a product of ideas held together by logical reasoning, says Kenneth Bailey, a person who spent 60 years in the Mideast and read Scriptures in original languages as well as in Arabic. In this theological world of doctrinal precepts held by a reasoned logic we have largely abandoned parables in our search for good theology. This is lamentable (Lent is a good time to mention this and lament ;-)) Seriously, this wrong focus is also noted by NT Wright as a major reason we (in the United States) don't use the parables and stories of the New Testament as ways of doing and forming theology. If theology is built on singular statements, propositions, reason and logic then all one needs do is be willing to think and work hard at the system of logic. But, as Kenneth Bailey points out, for Jesus the stories, parables, metaphors and dramatic actions ARE the language of theology and do not require another “system” to squash them into (Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, p280-281). Our task is take responsibility to hear the story and metaphors as they are spoken in the life setting of Jesus' culture. Let us not try to hear the parable as a delivery system for an idea, rather, the parable IS communicating faith and life in a whole, living and very viable form. One does not need to take it apart so much as to soak it in, listen in, with and through it. Let it be the lens that sharpens life's issues into a health view of God and others! Jesus said the words I speak to you are spirit and life!

For us here today then, we don't need great intellect or study to hear the parable . . . we do need to let it build the house of many rooms of meaning Jesus is constructing. Nowhere is it stated that a parable is to have only one meaning any more than the Gettysburg Address has only one historically significant meaning or a work of art has only one meaning! (Bailey, p282) Remember, it is our LORD Jesus speaking to us in this, telling us all we need for faith and life in this Word today. As we stand in the audience of this parable, in the back of the crowd or close enough to smell the perfume of the brothel or the stench of hogs or feel the cut of the elder brother's sarcasm “this son of YOURS” or see the lines of kindness etched into the father's eyes, forehead and mouth edges . . . let us simply listen and let us pray for big

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ears and hearts ready to receive what the Spirit is saying to us, the church, on whom the ends of the ages has come!

Let us also remember to ask, “What might this metaphor, event, encounter mean in this setting and culture of Jesus’ day?” The greatest offense to any piece of literature, regardless of whether it is God-breathed or not, is to force it into another worldview in service of our own agendas! This is not a Freudian, Marxist, New Age, Existential or Post-post-modern text- it is a word and spirit of Jesus- receive it as such.

Part II – The parable of the Prodigal Son(s) and Loving Father 1) Setting: the last and longest of a series of three parables about things lost, sheep (1 of 99), coin (1 of 10) and son (1 of 2). In each case there is: a) something lost; b) a seeker of that lost item;c) some effort/cost/risk to seek that animal or person, and; d) an invitation to celebrate once it is found!

Vs 11-There was a man with two sons . . . on one level we know the family dynamics of our experience . . . feeling of favoritism, jealousy, neglect, preference, anger, selfishness, bitterness and compassion are part of all families. In the larger sense we can also see people groups and nations . . . the younger son may no doubt be recalling images in some of the Jewish minds listening as the son who is goyim or gentile or unclean, those the Bible refers to as “the nations”, e.g. Non-Jewish, non-Torah-keeping, uninstructed . . . notice that they don’t obey the rules, they eat pork, they fornicate and come home bringing only their sins and a contrite heart, no obedience to any commands. These are not worthy recipients of God’s favor in many eyes, Jewish or otherwise . . . Those who simply ask for mercy, those who have no list of accomplishments to bring to God, no name, no money, no rights or privileges. All they have to bring is their sense of lostness, disorientation, regret, frustration, hopeless and alone they have been ground to contrition by the currents of life.

Vs 12- The younger’s request is not only out of keeping but genuinely disrespectful and rude, directly denying the commandment to honor father and mother. It is like saying, “Dad, I want you dead so I can get my share of the inheritance now. I don’t care about you, or my family or the honor of our name, only about the access to pleasure and power that this money will give me.” Curiously the father agrees . . .

Vs 13- The young son wastes no time to get out of Fergus Falls and go to California or New York or Vancouver or Paris or Bangkok . . . take your pick! Or, the young woman wastes no time to get out of the church community of St James or elsewhere, away from those that could guide, control or direct her life in any way . . . she goes off to college in a large city, or whatever. . . Have you ever been the young person itching to get away from rules, morality, and “have to’s”? I wonder what you are thinking . . .

Vs 14-16 – The fledging runs out of resources and needs help . . . by the way; the “pods the pigs were eating” is likely St John’s bread, a very low grade, starchy food that grows on the Carob tree (ceratonia siliqua). To eat these simple fruits, often given to animals, is a sigh of abject poverty (NICC, LUKE, p411). A famine creates even more stress and there is no refuge from the onslaught of life . . . when it rains, it pours. It’s as if one is fleeing a mountain lion and takes refuge in a cabin, only to be bit by a rattlesnake curled up under the table!

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Vs 17- Remembering . . . now, unless our ears be without hearing and our anger at authority in such a rage we are totally blinded by our own pity, we feel and see some value in pain, some mercy of reflection, some breaking of the absolute idea that I am right and the rest be damned! He remembers what he did have along with the responsibilities . . . food! Proverbs says a “person’s stomach works for them” that is, even when we can’t think straight, our need for food is a recall that we are meant to earn our daily bread and not rely only on others, not be lazy. This is contrition-pride and self-will are ground away.

Vs 18-19 Repentance, “Father, I have sinned against heaven (God is in view here but the Jewish writers did not overuse the name of God, hence “against heaven”) and against you. . . A turning “Let me be like a hired hand . . .”

Vs 20 The Father is watching. According to the Law of Moses, the community could be given the right to stone the son that shows such blatant dishonor of the Father. The compassion of the Father is watching for his son, lest he be punished by the village. He runs to him, kisses him in an act of respectful love and acceptance and does not wait to hear any confession; love “remembers not a wrong done to it” (1 Cor 13)

Vs 21 His practiced prayer is interrupted by the mercy of the Father . . . so eager to forgive, God does not wait until we have made all these vows and promises, indeed, he cannot wait to assure us we are fully his children, fully forgiven, all is forgotten and lost in the welcome of his embrace!

Vs 22-24 Forgiven, Restored and given access to the full rights of the household, he immediately gets the signet ring of the family and the celebration begins

Vs 25-30 But this is earth and it is real and this is not the final restoration, almost every family and certainly every church has the younger brother as well as the older brother . . . the one who has in his/her own mind, a better understanding of grace and restoration than even God!

Notice he is “in the field”- his work ethic is impeccable, perhaps obsessive and compulsive even. When hearing of the return of his brother, there is only anger and a religious pleading . . . focused on the elder son’s own way of defining religion and even defining his own righteousness . . . “I have been working like a slave for you” [actually, no, God does demand that kind of life]. The older son centers rightness on recalling sins with a cautious piety, somehow paying back something in suffering or restitution for these faults, taking time to prove he is really turned to God. After all, is that not simply the better part of wisdom?

Vs31-32 Wow . . . the answer is full of grace and mercy, even to the seemingly over-religious elder son, focused on law-keeping, proving and how much this brother has squandered! Grace abounds for each son, none is alienated by the Father, none is really favored, celebration is always an option because all God has is ours!

So these are the longer notes,

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What do I see as the essence of this parable for us? (Section III)

- 1) The focus is on the hospitality of the Father and his love of both sons. The seeking God, the God of Mission, welcome, restoration and reconciliation of ALL his children – Gentile and Jew.
- 2) Bringing in the 2 Corinthians reading, I hear a loud resounding transfer of the compassion and hospitality of God to all of us as a responsibility of being Gospel people. Listen to its notes “regard no one from a human point of view” “new creation” “God reconciled us and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” “not counting our sins against us” “we are ambassadors for Christ; God making his appeal through us” “he made him to be sin ... we might become the righteousness of God.” All this to say, as individuals and the church, we are called to welcome back any that go astray or go away with the same non-questioning, non-demanding spirit. If someone comes back we have not seen for awhile or a new person we are not to place any kind of accounting upon them, only offer mercy and celebration to any who return with a heart to seek God. This requires some reflection on how to do this, let us role play a bit and think about what we can say that does not focus on how long a person has been gone or what might have brought about their leaving . . . let us give the mercy and freedom we see that the Father of the house gives in this story.
- 3) We are it. There is no other group on earth called to do this as a community . . . not a government or other organization . . . this is a call for the church to be the body, the welcoming body of Christ and it costs to welcome someone back!
- 4) Moses curiosity about God is like us, we investigate some aspect of the wonder of God in nature, or the universe . . . yet notice the progression. This is not only a God of nature but of community, of peoples – this is especially a God of rescue who feels suffering and strangely ties Himself to those whom He calls to go into, go after, go rescue the suffering. Moses’ response is a lot like ours . . . seemingly noble and somewhat humble “who am I . . .” (to deal with such great issues that should be your doing God) or “what could I say that will make a difference?” Just tell them, the God who is God today and always has sent you. Why do we do what we do? Jesus commanded us to go to all nations with a strange message – Good news! God is not counting your sins against you! God has forgiven you, welcomes you and wants to celebrate with you!
- 5) To say we are a part of Christ but are not a part of Christ’s passion and mission is out of keeping with what these parables and metaphors tell us about our identity! You did not choose me, Jesus said, but I chose you and appointed you to go, in my Name and to reach others, do good and be my ambassadors. There is no participation in Christ without participation in Christ’s mission to the world.
- 6) IF lent means turning and contrition leading to newness, let us be turned toward the world, toward any who have gone and seek to return in the same spirit we see here in this word!

Prayer: Father, let us be people of welcome to others, by your Spirit, so that we participate in being for others for Christ’s sake, sent across physical, ethnic, social and other barriers in a gracious hospitality of gospel lifestyle. Amen.