

“Unfair Grace” – Lk 15:1-3, 11b-32 – Lent 4 – Mar 14/10

“How dare he?!” Can’t you just hear the anger, the spite? “How dare he welcome him back like that?!” Can’t you just hear the rage, the jealousy, the resentment? “How dare he throw more good money after bad?!”

Ah yes, the parable of the whiny older son. No, I know that’s not how many of you think of it, but it’s one good title for it. Perhaps that is even a better title than the usual name by which the ‘the parable of the prodigal son’ is known. But both of those titles miss the mark, and even miss the point.

That “How dare he?!” in the parable is an echo of what prompted Jesus to tell this parable. As this incident opens, we see yet one more attempt to draw Jesus into conflict, with the Pharisees and the scribes grumbling and saying, “this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them”. And it was true. Jesus certainly did welcome sinners and eat with them. Luke goes so far as to claim that **all** the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him, and from what the church grumblers were claiming it is pretty apparent that the tax collectors and sinners not only got near, they were indeed welcomed. Fed, even. Shared a bite to eat. Broke bread, so to speak. Most likely even shared a cup of wine. Scandalous, isn’t it?

Well, it sure was scandalous. We tend to skip over the description of these people with whom Jesus broke bread and shared a cup, but his actions were scandalous. (I’m hoping my deliberate use of communion language is making you twinge just a little bit – if it does, take that feeling and multiply it a thousand or a million times, and you’ll begin to get a hint of how the Pharisees and the scribes were feeling.) We’re pretty domesticated when it comes to talking about tax collectors. Oh, our pulse may race a bit, especially at this time of year, but nothing like in Jesus’ country, and time. The tax collectors there were viewed pretty much the way Nazi collaborators were in France during World War II, or the civil servants working for the Americans in Iraq today. They were pretty much despised for making big money off the backs of their countrymen while hiding behind and using the protection of the occupying forces. The sinners were not people who had said, “oh darn!” on the Sabbath – they were criminals convicted of essentially civil crimes and who had been kicked out of public worship. In other words, they were not eligible for legitimate jobs and had to scratch out a living however they could – their status was pretty close to today’s dumpster divers.

So, here’s this man proclaimed by hundreds or even thousands as a special kind of prophet, clearly evidencing the power of God at work in him through his incredible acts of healing, sitting down at table to break bread and drink wine with the least-desirable, least-wanted, least-acceptable people in town. Scandalous! Outrageous! How dare he?! Any good, righteous, religious person ought to be shocked at such behaviour! And they were.

Unfortunately, they still are. The good, righteous, religious today are still shocked at such behaviour. Not everywhere, thank God, and not here, thank God. But all too often today the same accusations of eating with sinners rises too quickly upon the lips of the super-clean and the hyper-pure. Individual congregations, even entire denominations are being torn in two by controversies fueled by the same emotions experienced by the Pharisees and scribes, if not by the exact same words. Even if the words may be slightly different, the fears, the insulations, the defense mechanisms, the rejections are the same. And if you think I’m exaggerating, just imagine what would happen if I were to invite some of my fellow Presbyters over to the Pumpjack for a beer and introduce them to some of my friends there. I’ll bet you would be able to hear the screeching about eating and drinking with sinners all the way out to the center of the bible belt in the Valley! It is so sad! Sometimes I feel like doing it just to shake them out of their carefully-constructed, well-insulated and detached-from-reality religious world, to realize that these people are also God’s people, and need to hear that as much as anyone else.

The gospel evidence is pretty clear that Jesus liked to shake up uptight people as well. He couldn't resist telling an outrageous parable to the Pharisees and the scribes who were mumbling and grumbling at him about eating with sinners. Outrageous? Absolutely! It's too bad that this parable is so familiar to us that our ears filter it right out, and if it makes any impact on us it certainly isn't outrage. When we hear it, we smile, and we nod, and we feel good about how it all turned out all right for the young man. Awwww, isn't that nice?! Or, in the words of the Saturday Night Live church lady, "isn't that special?!".

I wish there was some way for you to be hit in the stomach with this story the way the original Pharisees and scribes were. Their sense of propriety would be jarred right from the beginning, when the younger son asked his father for his future share in cash, now. We might lift our eyebrows a little at the impertinence; they would be abhorred. It might help a bit to realize that customs and life views in Jesus' world were very much Oriental – and it is almost impossible for those of us who did not grow up in an Oriental world to understand just what that means. You ESL students who did indeed grow up in an Asian family will have a much better appreciation of just what an outrage would be caused by a younger son demanding his future inheritance now, in cash. Any respectable father would be severely angry at such behaviour, right? No son worthy of being a son would even ask, right?

And so Jesus put the Pharisees and the scribes off stride right at the beginning of this parable, triggering strong negative reactions. And the barrage on their emotions continued, as the son heads off to foreign (i.e. 'Godless') lands, indulges in depraved behaviour (apparently even the oldest son has heard the tales of prostitutes and other lewd living!), and eventually acts like (gasp, horrors!) a Gentile, wallowing with the pigs. The Pharisees and the scribes would be horror-struck at the very thought of such behaviour. Their whole life, their whole being was focused on keeping away from such people – even being accidentally in the same room with someone like that would cause themselves to be declared unclean, and they would have to go through an elaborate routine to even be able to walk through the doors of a synagogue, never mind the Temple. Raised on stories of being infected by such degenerate people, the Pharisees and scribes could only imagine the horrendous consequences of being touched by one of them. The very thought would make them sick.

And so, just at the point where his combative audience was at the moment of supreme disgust, Jesus blew their minds with an ending that had the degenerate son being welcomed back with open arms, a feast, a banquet, with excitement and thanksgiving, with celebration and tears of joy. And in case his contemptuous critics missed the point, the older son echoes their very thoughts, "how dare he?!". How dare the father welcome back this dissipated wretch like a son?

We have no idea how those Pharisees and scribes reacted. The text does not tell us whether they were able to put one and one together and get two, whether or not they were able to see that the parable is really about the forgiving father, and see the obvious parallel Jesus was drawing between that forgiving father and the God who welcomes with joy and festivities any who would return to him. Sadly it's all too possible that the Pharisees and scribes went away sulking, mumbling even more so about this upstart who challenged their very core religious values with a new, shocking and offensive understanding of God. Probable even that most if not all of them went away with their ears closed over, with their hearts hardened to this truth from the one who was the truth, and the way, and the life.

I want to be clear here that I am not advocating that it is necessary to live a life of dissipation in order to be accepted by God – this is no excuse to go wallow with the hogs! One of the least-recognized truths from this parable, at least in my experience, is that the father had two sons. Now before your eyes glaze over, and you nod sagely, and think "of course he had two sons", stop for a second and realize that the father loved both sons, consoled both sons, was generous to both sons, accepted both sons equally. The part that the Pharisees and scribes missed, and that the uptight upright

today miss, is that this is not an *either/or* story – it is a *both/and* story. It is not a story of rejection of either child, it is a story of unconditional acceptance of both. That's why it's the parable of the accepting and loving parent, not the parable of the child gone bad, a story of a grace that is so unfair it is able to cover us all, not merely the righteous and pure.

One of the neat things about parables is that they often provide an opportunity for us to insert ourselves as one of the characters or elements in the story. For example, here we can identify ourselves with the wayward younger son, or with the whiney older son, or with the father. I suppose we could even see ourselves as the farm owner who hired the younger son and mistreated him like a migrant farm worker, but I hope that's not the case. Some of us can relate to the wayward younger son, having found ourselves mired deep in messes of our own making, filled with self-reproach and wondering how we could ever be accepted again in society in general, and by loved ones in particular. Others of us might be able to relate to the older whiney son, recognizing times in our lives when we have been overly self-focused, feeling somehow neglected in the midst of our privileged lives, and complaining if anyone else seemed to get an advantage we were absolutely sure should have been ours. People are often reluctant to see themselves as the gracious father, reserving this role for God, and yet by the grace of God some of us are able to point to times in our lives when we were able to feel God's love and grace and mercy in enough abundance that we were able to display it in our own lives; times when we were able to suppress any urges to say "I told you so!" or "I warned you this is how you'd turn out!" and instead offer a gracious and love-filled "welcome home ... let's put on a feast in your honour!" Hopefully all of us can see ourselves as the crowd invited to come join in the heavenly feast offered in rejoicing for all the lost who have found their way back home.

The Pharisees and the scribes may have walked away from this story missing the point – we have no such excuse. Not only do we understand Jesus' meaning, we see this parable as Jesus' validation of his own ministry, and as a prototype for our own. With the same boldness displayed by Jesus we are invited to dare to forgive, to dare to accept, to dare to sit with and eat with and talk with and share God's love with the outcasts of our world, the sinners of our neighbourhood. This parable was a clear challenge to the Pharisees and scribes, and it is a clear challenge to us and to the whole church today, a challenge to invite the broken, the despairing, the dissipated to the table, to hear the good news of God who forgives without the blink of an eye, who welcomes back the lost with rejoicing and festivities.