

## St. Andrew's Church - March 14, 2010

Sermon "Lost Son" - The Rev. Doug Kendall

Lord God,

Open our eyes that we might see your way,  
open our ears that we might hear your word,  
open our hearts that we might experience your love  
and respond with thanks.  
In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

A long time ago stories used to be told  
to bring the everyday and the mundane into sharper focus.  
Jesus was a brilliant story teller.  
He told stories about truth and reality.  
He told stories that involved real people,  
that involved the people listening to the story.  
He told stories designed to bring about change  
in those who heard his words.

Picture the scene if you will.  
Jesus was on a hillside one day,  
He had been getting into trouble again  
with the scribes and Pharisees.  
They were grumbling because Jesus was not only spending time  
with sinners and tax collectors,  
but he had been seen eating with them as well.

Well on the hillside that day,  
those sinners and tax collectors were coming to hear him yet again,  
but the Scribes and Pharisees were already there.  
As the sinners drew near,  
you could see that the two groups were mixing  
about as well as water and oil.  
The Scribes and Pharisees were grumbling  
and looking down on the rough looking bunch of sinners,  
The sinners and tax collectors  
were none too meek and mild  
in their response to the Pharisees stares.

Over top of the grumbling and cursing of the two groups,  
Jesus voice is heard...

***“There was once a man... who had two sons...”***

***The younger said to his father,***

***‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’***

***So the father divided the property between them.***

***It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags  
and left for a distant country.***

The two groups on the hillside

are looking at Jesus rather than at each other now.

The Pharisees are shocked,

at the audacity of the younger son in the story.

How dare he ask for his inheritance while his father was alive!

That was breaking all the rules to do such a thing, UNTHINKABLE!

The Sinners and the tax collectors are thinking out loud

"What would you do with such an inheritance?"

Jesus has done what he wanted to do, he has their attention now,  
so continues with the story.

The younger son has gone away,

and the story shifts to his wild life in the foreign land.

Wine women and song, the high life,

more money than he knows what to do with, parties every night...

more friends than he has ever had back home...

The sinners and tax collectors on the hillside are nudging each other,  
as shared memories of the not so distant past are recalled.

Eventually the money ran out for the younger son though.

Then the friends began to run out too.

Then to top it all off, there was a famine in the land,

and the he had no way to support himself.

No choice but to work.

But the only job he could get was working on a farm,

not that there's anything wrong with working on a farm,  
I know some mighty fine people who work on farms!  
But this young Jewish boy could only get a job on a pig farm.  
The younger son had stooped to the lowest job he could possibly have  
for a kosher Jewish son of a land owner.

As he was going out to feed the pigs one day,  
he realized that he was so hungry,  
he would even be willing to eat the food  
that he was supposed to give to the pigs.

This was the bottom of the barrel.

Not only had he made himself unclean and untouchable  
by working with the pigs,  
but he was even willing to eat what made the pigs themselves  
unclean in the first place.

The leftover scraps and compost that was the pig's food.

He realized that he had hit rock bottom,  
and as he thought about home,  
he remembered that even the worst off of the people  
on his father's property  
even the slaves at least ate well and had a roof over their heads.

So he decided to go home.

He would return to his father's house, confess his sin and ask for a job.

When you think about it, even this plan was optimistic.

He had disowned his father by asking for his inheritance,  
and now that he had squandered what his father had given him,  
why was he expecting to have any place back home?

And yet he set out, rehearsing his homecoming speech as he went,

***"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."***

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I am no longer worthy to be called your son;  
treat me like one of your hired hands."***

Back on the hillside the Pharisees are listening to this.  
This is just the sort of thing they were looking forward to.  
In the Jewish faith there was always room for confession, repentance  
and reconciliation, especially within families.  
If you were a Pharisee, someone familiar with the law  
you would know the ending to this story.  
The younger son would return,  
go through a time of ritual purification after the pig pen incident,  
then ask forgiveness from the father,  
then ask forgiveness from his older brother,  
and then live the rest of his days  
maybe as a servant in the house.

By implication, Jesus parable would then be about  
the tax collectors and sinners repenting and seeking forgiveness  
from God and from the Pharisees and teachers of the law.  
and them becoming a part of the people of Israel again...  
after the required purification mind you.  
Simple story, happy ending, and the Pharisees are shown to be right  
and righteous.

Now it is the Pharisees and the scribes  
nodding and nudging each other on the hillside.  
"Come on back sinners and admit you were wrong,  
after you have proven yourself to be sorry,  
we Pharisees will forgive you."

Jesus hasn't finished the story though.  
The younger son is still on his way home, still rehearsing his speech...  
He is still a long way off, his home is just coming into view.  
Suddenly he sees some movement, there is someone running towards him,  
his father running out to greet him.  
This is unheard of.  
A rich land owner running?  
This would be beneath his station in life, especially in front of the staff,  
Especially in front of the neighbours,  
What would people say!  
But what will happen?

Will he be angry,  
will he turn the younger son away,  
will he keep his distance  
until the younger son has been made clean?

The father is within earshot now,  
and the younger son begins his speech,  
which is well rehearsed by now...

***"Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;  
I am no longer worthy to be called your son..."***

And that is as far as he could get.  
It is as though his father was not even Listening.  
Before the younger son could finish his speech  
his father had thrown his arms around him,  
and was calling back 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!"***

But this is not how the story is supposed to go.  
No purification for this unclean, pig farming son?  
No reprimand from his father for squandering all that money?  
No conditional reconciliation based on the younger son's ability  
to prove that he could really change his ways?

Instead his father embraces him and kisses him -  
a sign that the ritual purification was not necessary  
He put a ring on his finger -  
a family ring signifying that he was no slave or servant,  
but his father's own dear son.

The finest robe on his back and sandals on his feet,  
acceptance as the most honoured person in the house.  
And to top it all off, the fatted calf,  
the unblemished animal that had been grain fed

and kept for a special occasion  
- would be slaughtered and a huge celebration was about to begin.

Meanwhile back on the hillside,  
the Sinners and Tax collectors in the crowd are shouting for joy  
at this ending to the story.

It is the story of their reconciliation with God.

Not their reconciliation with the Pharisees and teachers of the law mind you,  
not their reconciliation with the established religion of the time,  
but reconciliation with God.

They have confessed their sin against God,  
returned asking for forgiveness, and it is theirs.

In fact God's grace is poured out on them  
even more generously than they could imagine.

The ring is on their fingers,  
God has embraced and kissed them  
and they are told that they are not unclean.

The great feast and party has begun,  
and Jesus has announced it to be so,  
and Jesus, the son of the almighty is the host.

On the hillside, the Pharisees and the Scribes are fuming.

This is verging on heresy.

This is not the way God acts, it is not fair!

They are not pleased with the end of the story...  
because it looks like they have been left out.

Jesus turns away from the shouting laughing sinners and faces  
the grumbling upset Pharisees and teachers of the law.

He goes on...

***"When the older son was still a long way off,  
he could hear the music, he could see the dancing,  
he could smell the fatted calf on the Barbeque.  
He shouted to one of the slaves, "What is going on here?"  
The answer came back, 'Your brother has come,  
and your father has killed the fatted calf,  
because he has got him back safe and sound.'***

***The older brother became angry, and refused to go into the party.  
His father had to come out and to plead with him.  
But there was no convincing the older brother to go in though.  
He said to his father angrily,  
'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 has devoured your property with prostitutes,  
you killed the fatted calf for him!'***

There is nothing more powerful than righteous indignation,  
and sibling rivalry mixed together.

Did you notice that the older brother never calls the younger brother  
BROTHER?

Instead he says,

***"When this son of yours came back, you killed the fatted calf for HIM"***

Because of what the younger brother has done,  
the older brother is unable to forgive him  
he is unable even to call him brother anymore,  
he has no relationship with him.

And how dare the father throw a party for his younger son,  
and kill the fatted calf to top it all off.

What about the older son, the responsible son.

The son who had stayed home working hard for so many years  
while the younger son had gone off  
living in sin and wasting his father's money?

How dare the father throw a party for this irresponsible younger son!

It was against all of the rules.

How dare the father presume... to be so gracious!

Remember, Jesus is standing in front of the Pharisees and teachers of the law  
as he is saying these things.

Jesus knows what the law is,

he knows how they would like to see the story end,  
he knows which rules of the church  
they would like to see followed.

But how will Jesus end this story?

Jesus concludes, ***"Then the father said to his older son,  
'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.  
But we had to celebrate and rejoice,  
because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life;  
he was lost and has been found.'"***

Then nothing more... just silence.

In the parable, the closing scene is of the older son standing out in the field.

The father is walking slowly back to the banquet  
and the celebration for his younger son.

As the lights dim, it is not clear if the older son  
will go in and join the banquet or not.

His pride and his anger and all of his rules say no,  
but his father has come out to say "yes".

On the hillside Jesus is standing  
in front of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

They have seen themselves in the older brother.

The reliable ones, the faithful ones,  
the ones who knew all of the rules.

But when God chooses to live by other rules,  
and show grace instead of judgment,  
are they able to accept God's invitation to the banquet as well?

How different are we today from the first two groups  
who heard Jesus Parable?

You know I envy the tax collectors and the sinners their experience.

For them it was clear.

It was easy to see that they had sinned and needed to repent.

It was easy to see how much they needed forgiveness,  
but is it really possible that God could forgive them  
without following our rules?

Is it really possible that God might be forgiving people today,  
whom we might find unforgivable,  
and who may not even deserve

or have earned God's forgiveness by our way of thinking?  
I would love to see myself as one of those converted repentant sinners  
enjoying God's banquet and celebrating new found forgiveness,  
but to be honest I see myself as being more like  
one of the Pharisees.

Always a part of the church, working away in God's household,  
while other people are enjoying God's grace.  
While other people are enjoying the fullness of God's love.

This is not the parable of the prodigal Son,  
Jesus parable is the story of the gracious father.  
The father who did not just run out to meet his younger son  
who had been off sinning and living the wild life,  
But the same father who also went out  
to invite the older son into the celebrations as well.

This is also the parable of reconciliation.  
Reconciliation not just between God and the younger son,  
or God and the older son, but also between the two brothers.

Do you see yourself as a bit of the older brother as well?  
How many people do we know  
whom we could call children of God,  
but we would find it harder to call them brothers and sisters?  
What relationships do you have that have been hurt  
by pride or self-righteousness, or some sin committed against you?  
Are we the older brothers standing in the field,  
invited into the banquet of reconciliation by God,  
invited into the fullness of God's life,  
but unable to go in and because our rules and our pride  
will not allow us to accept God's grace?

Jesus knew what he was doing when he ended his parable  
with the older brother still standing in the field.  
Like the passage I preached on last week,  
Jesus story of the tree in the vineyard,  
And like so many other of Jesus parables,  
this parable can not end until we end the story.

So how will we end our stories?

Do we have relationships that need reconciliation?

In this season of lent,

as we journey towards Easter Sunday morning,

God is challenging us to come into his banquet.

All are welcome, we just have to leave our self righteousness,

our pride and our anger outside,

because there is no room for those things

at God's banquet of reconciliation.

The sun is setting on the field,

are we ready to go in and see who God has invited to the banquet?

In Jesus name. AMEN.