

SERMON, ST JOHN'S LENT IV

I often say that to fully comprehend the richness of a biblical passage, we must go inside the story and take on the role of each and every character. It's almost like one of those amazing one-man plays, where one actor plays many individuals, both male and female, resulting in a dizzying display of multiple personality disorder. Just a couple of months ago we saw a humorous little play at the Iao Theater, "Ahi Wrap" by Derek Nakagawa and Francis Taua, in which three actors played 16 characters so brilliantly that I stupidly didn't realize it until I was told that this was so at intermission! The Gospel Christmas narrative lends itself particularly well to this kind of exercise: you and I are Mary, bearing forth the Child of the Promise, we are Joseph, nurturing Mother and Child, we are the angels, shepherds and Wisemen all witnessing this Miracle of Miracles, we **are** the Child of the Promise, but we are also Herod, intent on destroying him.

Today's Parable of the Prodigal Son is another story that invites us to enter in and take on the role of each character. Now, as a Parable, a biblical scholar would insist that the story can only have one memorable message, one takeaway, and generally it is said to be that final punch line: "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." Jesus definitely intended to emphasize, as he does in other parables, the joy of heaven when one sinner repents. This theme of reconciliation with God and one another is also represented in both our Old Testament and Epistle readings. We have that beautiful line from Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt," a sign that in God, despite the slavery whereby we are in bondage to the bad choices we all make, God lovingly calls us back into relationship. In Corinthians, Paul writes those magnificent words, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new." In Christ, no matter what we've done or not done, we are invited home and there is always a new beginning, a fresh start." I am reminded of that beautiful old hymn by John Keble:

New every morning is the love
our wakening and uprising prove;
through sleep and darkness safely brought,
restored to life and power and thought.

New mercies, each returning day,
hover around us while we pray;
new perils past, new sins forgiven,
new thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.

Truthfully, this theme of grace, forgiveness and a new start is the core meaning of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But there is so much more here to enlighten us about God's miracle of grace if we imagine ourselves to be each and every character in this rich and moving story, incidentally, found only here in the Gospel of Luke. We begin by taking on the role of the younger son: restless, impetuous, eager to individuate, to go out on his own, to prove himself.

Does this sound familiar? Have there been those times in your life when you exhibited a careless restlessness, the desire to prove that you can make it on your own? The need to prove to others, your parents, your friends, that you have it in you to venture forth into the unknown and break the shackles of convention, old ties, old norms? My sense, from many many conversations with people on Maui, is that many of them are here because a restlessness, not unlike that of the Prodigal Son, caused them to break old molds, to escape and pursue a new adventure on this Rock in the middle of the Pacific, famously the most isolated place in all the world. I've noticed, in fact, that restlessness brought some of them from the East Coast or Europe to California, but that this restlessness sent them ever further West to land here. If this isn't your own story, I suggest that you should consider at least some kind of reckless adventure before you die, because nothing creative ever happens unless we break the old molds from time-to-time and venture forth! I is for this reason that I would say that the younger son, the Prodigal, is easily the most attractive character in this drama because he's willing to be a pioneer in new and dangerous worlds. And, it goes without saying that these creative ventures don't always turn out right, yet very few of us who have made decisions to venture out into new and scary territory ever actually regret it. This is, after all, how we grow. And the Prodigal, like you and me, makes stupid decisions in the new world: blowing his father's hard-earned money on "dissolute living." We learn, only from the other son, that the Prodigal had devoured his father's property with prostitutes. Definitely very bad choices, but certainly growth experiences. His "bottoming out" as a Jew feeding pigs and longing for the pods the pigs were eating, may reflect moments in our own lives when things have become so bad that we have nothing left but God. This, by the way, is the glory of the 12-Step movement, which teaches that ultimately our only hope is in God when all the things (even people) of this world let us down. And so, the Prodigal swallows his pride and determines to go on an even more painful journey home, where all he can hope is to be his father's slave. Sound familiar?

Now, let's become the father, whose painful task of forgiveness challenges our deep need to hold onto our grievances, to maintain the grudges and petty hatreds that sometimes seem to make life sweet, but devour us from inside. The extraordinary grace that lies at the heart of true forgiveness, of course, constitutes the core Christian understanding of the nature of God as Perfect Love: "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." This is God's nature, but living out this Grace in our own lives is what makes us true to our own nature created in the image of God. When we forgive, we become our true selves. If the Prodigal is Every Person who ventures forth and screws up, then the father is Every Person, "who loves because he first loved us." The true punch line of this whole story is actually, "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Could there be a more beautiful happy ending? "While he was still far off..." Wow! There's no begging for forgiveness, just pure grace, as St. Augustine called it "previent grace," grace that goes before us and surprises us by its joy, its infinite depth of love. And notice that there is no questioning, no grudges, no strings, just generous and genuine love. The father could only have exhibited such grace if grace had first been shown him – he knew the Perfect Love of God and that liberated him to show the same Love to his Son. We are all the Prodigal, but because we have all known Grace, we are called to be the father and channels of Grace for one another.

And finally, of course, the eldest son. What do we make of him? How are you and I him? That's, sadly, an easy one, for it is also familiar territory for us to seek the safety of the old routine, the old order of things, to be fearful of venturing forth and be protective of what we insist belongs to us by right. I don't mean to suggest that the eldest son's fidelity to his father and hard work are bad things at all: it's good to be faithful and industrious. But it is also sad not to take risks at all, be fearful of new things, too careful and fastidious to venture out into the wilderness of discovery, adventure and the universe of potentially bad decisions. The sin of the eldest son, however, is not in his unwillingness to take risks, but in his denial of forgiveness, which is essentially the inability to comprehend the nature of God as Perfect Love. This is, again, what Jesus described as the "sin against the Holy Ghost," denial of the very essence of his entire life, ministry and death. As Paul writes, again, in today's epistle, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ..." We all have our moments when we are that small-minded eldest son denying God's Grace. We are all the Prodigal, who have known the infinite blessing of Grace through the unconditional Love and forgiveness of God and others we have been blessed to meet on life's journey. We are, however, who we were created to be when we are the father, who "while the Prodigal was still far off, saw him and was filled with compassion; and ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." So, must we love one another and forgive from the heart.