

“Are You Going to the Party?”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

3-31-19 Dialogue Church Sunday

Based upon Luke 15:11-32; Acts 9:26-30

Did you hear the one about a minister who delivered a sermon on the parable of the prodigal son? When he got to the point where the father sees his son returning and races out to meet him, the minister said, “Throwing wide his arms, the father said...,” at which point a child in the congregation cried out, “You’re grounded!”¹

I don’t know if that ever really happened. But I do know that there have been many people throughout the ages who would have expected that or worse to happen when hearing the story for the first time. So, as we begin our discussion today on what this familiar parable has to teach us about God and ourselves, I want to start by asking the inspired young people who brought the story to life for us today, how they feel about the story after having been steeped in it, some for the first time, this past month in practice.

Paige O’Neil:² You played the prodigal daughter, the one who insulted her father, took her inheritance, squandered it, and then came slinking home to her father when she had nothing left to live on. How do you think your character expected her father would receive her when she was approaching the house? Putting yourself in the shoes of your character, how did it make you feel that the father greeted you so warmly, and wanted to throw you a party for coming home?

Lauren Gimperling: You played the good, obedient older daughter who spent her whole life doing the right thing and working hard for her father. How did your character feel when she found out her trouble-making little sister was being thrown an amazing party by her father? Do you think it was fair?

Alex Hildebrand: If you really were the father to two girls who behaved this way, do you think you would have responded the same way the father did in the story, or would you have done something else?

Most of us find it easy to relate to someone in this story. If we are acutely aware of the ways we have hurt others, made bad choices, or rejected God, we may see the prodigal child as a kindred spirit, and rejoice in the father’s forgiving and loving reception of him. If we are parents, who have struggled with rebellious children, or with trying to keep the peace between children consumed with sibling rivalry, we may feel both the father’s pain and joy as our own. And if we have worked very hard to be good people and sacrificial servants our whole lives like the older child, we may bristle with him at the thought of that bratty, horrible, sinful younger child getting welcomed back into the fold without so much as a stern look, let alone any punishment. We may

¹ Homilecticonline.com, citing rupa.com/pipermail/jokes/2000-June/001046.html.

² Individuals and/or the congregation were asked the bolded questions as a part of the “dialogue.”

agree with the brother that the party is tantamount to rewarding bad behavior while ignoring or devaluing the good.

Just with a show of hands, who do you relate to most in this story? The prodigal son? The elder brother? The father?

It is possible at different times in our lives to relate to all three of the main characters. Today, however, I want to focus on the elder brother, not just because so many of us relate most to him, but also because I think we are living in “elder brother” times, in the sense that our society is increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of redemption. The parable celebrates the fact that the father, who stands for God, receives sinners with open arms, and offers unconditional forgiveness and love. He doesn’t even require true repentance in this story. Did you notice that? The father came running out, ready to hug and kiss the youngest son even before he said a word. The youngest had a whole speech prepared, prompted by honest contrition or wise scheming – which don’t know which. But when he delivers part of the speech, his words are really almost irrelevant because by then his father is already making party plans. That’s good news for us because we are all sinners. God wants to embrace us always. God eagerly forgives us and welcomes us home. But in our world, that kind of grace doesn’t really fly. Before all is forgiven, (if it even can be), we need something, some proof of sincere repentance, some evidence that the person has suffered or will suffer for his offenses, or both. Even then, typically all we are willing to offer is forgiveness. Rewards like the party are reserved for the good, not the bad.

Recognizing this, pastor/author Michael Lindvall has rewritten the parable in a way that he thinks would better satisfy the older brother in all of us. The story begins the same way with the younger son rejecting the father by seeking his inheritance, squandering it on loose living, and then deciding he better go back home or he’s going to die. But when he is almost home, in Lindvall’s version, instead of the father running out to meet him, the father sees his youngest out the window, but remains seated at his desk. When the son is brought to him, the father looks at him with a grim countenance and his arms crossed across his chest. So, the son gives his full confessional speech. Then the father responds: “Quickly take him into the field, and there he shall toil side by side with his faithful brother for forty days (at least) until he proves himself worthy to be a son of mine.”

After forty days, the elder brother comes near the house, and the father runs out and embraces and kisses him. The elder says, “This younger son of yours has grown *somewhat* in spirit during these forty days of hard labor in the fields.” So, his father said to his older son, “Son, if *you* think your younger 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 you have been so faithful, and your younger brother who was dead is alive and who was lost is found.” And the older son says, “Let me ponder the matter of such a banquet, father. Perhaps after another forty days it would be fitting to kill the fatted calf for us.”³

³ Lindvall, Michael A., *Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem Curriculum*, Session 4, (TheThoughtfulChristian.com, 2007), 3. (Italics

How do you feel about this version? Does it seem better or worse to you? Why?

It may be a part of human nature for us to want punishment before redemption and repentance before reward. We know, as only human beings can, that people can say they are sorry but not really mean it. We also believe that if you meet bad behavior with love and forgiveness, you can unintentionally enable more bad behavior. Families of addicts often learn this the hard way. How can you trust that someone really wants to change or has changed? Trust does not come easily to many of us. But as we heard in the other Scripture lesson from *Acts* today, it's not a new problem. The Christians in Jerusalem were equally reluctant to forgive and embrace the apostle Paul after his conversion experience. He felt that he was a new man after his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. But before that encounter he had been one of the leading persecutors of the followers of Christ. He had even eagerly held people's coats while they stoned Stephen to death for preaching the Good News. So, at first the Christians in Jerusalem did not trust that he really had become a Christian. The whole thing seemed more like a trap than a miraculous transformation to them. It wasn't until Barnabas testified to the truth of Paul's change of heart saying that he had personally witnessed the changes in his behavior that they welcomed Paul as a brother in ministry.

What does it take for you to forgive someone? What evidence do you require to believe that someone has truly changed?

In the past few years especially, we have increasingly been hearing stories in the news about famous people—politicians and celebrities usually—who did something bad twenty or thirty years ago that is only now coming to light. Maybe like the governor of Virginia, they donned black face or did something else that was racist. Maybe like multiple Hollywood celebrities, they were disrespectful of or abusive to women, or told off-color jokes that now seems in very poor taste. Right now, when people in the limelight are charged with offenses, society responds by demanding that they lose everything: job, reputation, relationships, sometimes freedom. Now let me be clear: I am not condoning black face or racism in any form, or sexism, sexual abuse, or other crimes for that matter. The reason why serious crimes typically do not have statutes of limitation is that we don't want time alone to allow criminals to avoid the consequences of their crimes, and particularly now when we are in a long-overdue time of awakening in terms of recognizing racism and sexism that was once ignored, we don't want to rewind the victims by excusing those who hurt them, or imply that the behavior was OK because that's just the way things were back then.

But all of that being said, what strikes me about many of these stories is that there is little or no serious discussion about redemption as a goal for either the perpetrators or society. There is little discussion of what the people have done in the decades since their alleged offenses occurred, and little or no credit given when the charged people have expressed sincere repentance, demonstrated it in the form of changed lives, or promised to change going forward. Not only does

mine.)

this show little understanding of human nature, it also suggests that we as a society believe that to allow them to be forgiven or given a second chance is to harm not just the victims, but also all the people like us who have not done such bad things. It's almost as if we are saying that if you ever did anything bad, you cannot ever become good, or do good, or be seen as good again.

The criminal justice system also reflects our discomfort with redemption.⁴ Since the 1970s, there has been an emphasis on using prison time as retribution, rather than as a means of rehabilitation. Numerous studies have shown that it is both more cost-effective and more healing for both the convict and society for rehabilitation to be prioritized over punishment. But in our desire to be tough on crime, and despite all the statistics which support a different approach, our laws and practices continue to emphasize punishment, showing zero tolerance, and treating people as "once a criminal always a criminal."

Imagine if God responded to our sins the same way? Imagine if God kept score, saying things like: "Thirty years ago you spent your money buying a fancy car when you could have given that money to the poor;" or "Two years ago you said something cruel to a friend or family member or stranger, so I'm sorry but you can't be in my flock anymore. You've got to stay with the goats instead of the sheep"? We all have enough of the younger son in us that this should make us very uncomfortable. Without God's willingness to forgive in Christ, we don't have a chance of proving ourselves truly worthy. Even if we wanted to make reparations, between what we have done personally and what we have done systemically we could never make amends adequately. That's why this parable is such good news. God wants us home more than anything. God loves us too much to say, "Good riddance to you, you hurtful spoiled child." God is always ready to forgive.

When we are feeling bitter like the older brother, therefore, the first thing we can do to help us realize that the father's party is a good thing, is to recognize that we have more in common with the younger son than we like to admit about ourselves. Even if we have done good all our lives, we are still prone to resentment. Even if we have served God our whole lives, we still have within us the desire for others to suffer and for us to be rewarded for doing what we're supposed to be doing. Those feelings are hardly exemplary. So, the father's graciousness is a blessing for us as well as the younger son.

The other thing to keep in mind is that just as the father ran out to greet the younger, he also ran out to greet the elder. When the elder was still in the fields, the father left the party, an act that would have been shameful for a host to do, and went to find his beloved oldest to make sure he also would come home. He reminded the oldest that all that he had was his. The elder wasn't getting less than the younger, he wasn't losing anything for being good. Yes, the party was for the younger but the elder could also feast on fatted calf. Yes, the younger was forgiven, but the elder would be, and was being, offered that same forgiveness. This story is about recognizing that there

⁴ See e.g. Bernard, James, Haas, Katie, Siler, Brian, and Weatherby Georgie Ann, "Perceptions of Rehabilitation and Retribution in the Criminal Justice System: A Comparison of Public Opinion and Previous Literature," JOURNAL FOR FORENSIC SCIENCES AND CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION, Oct. 3, 2017.

isn't a competition when it comes to winning God's affection and mercy and blessings. That's the best news of all.

The term prodigal means "profligate or wasteful," which is why this parable has long been called the parable of the prodigal son. But given that two sons in this story are lost and found, forgiven and loved, some have said that the name isn't appropriate. This really should be the story of the prodigal father, because the second meaning of "prodigal" is excessively generous. Let us rejoice that we have such a prodigal parent in God, and let us remember, to the extent that we think we are chips off the old block in terms of our goodness and obedience, that making room in our hearts for the redemption of those who have made bad choices isn't the same thing as condoning sin. It is loving the sinner as our Father does, and trusting that all our futures rest in God's wise and gracious hands. Thanks be to God for such mercy and love! Amen.