

Sermon: Lent 4

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 31, 2019

Year C

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Before it was released... the original title of the movie E.T.... was going to be A Boy's Life... Pretty Woman was going to be called \$3,000.00... the fee paid to Julia Roberts for a week's work... the original title for the cult classic Psycho... started out as Wimpy... and Woody Allen's Annie Hall went through a few variations... A Rollercoaster Named Desire... It Had to be a Jew... or Me and My Goy...

Titles can direct us to a particular way of understanding... towards a particular meaning... they may point us... direct us... to a particular agenda... what the author... or screenwriter... wanted us to get out of the story... thereby... possibly... limiting other messages which may speak to us even more...

Today... we read the story known as... The Prodigal Son... prodigal is related to the word prodigious... which means... *remarkably or impressively great in degree or extent*... in this case... the son who spent and lived excessively... now let's remember... this story did not begin with a title... the title came later... but the story could also be about the older son... and we could call it The Parable of the Resentful Older Brother... but the story could also be about the father... as I'll explain shortly...

The older brother could be resentful for several reasons... at the beginning of the parable... when the younger brother wished his father dead so he could get his share of the inheritance... according to Mosaic Law... the younger brother would have received only one-third of the estate... and that's what he took... and that's what he squandered... the other two-thirds... everything else... everything... would have belonged to the older brother... so when the father gives the younger son... the \$200.00

Ritz-Carlton robe... and the Van Cleef & Arpels diamond, ruby, and emerald ring... and the hand-tooled Birkenstock sandals... and the Omaha Steaks fatted calf... all these things rightly belonged to the the older brother... and on top of that... no one even told him that his brother has returned... he finds out only when he returns home from another backbreaking day working in the field... and discovers all the merriment... talk about being left out...

There is a deeper meaning though... a more grace-filled meaning... one which can be discovered only when we choose to look behind the title... and into who the characters represent... and which is brought to light through a commentary written by theologian Robert Capon... and from which I borrow...

Capon proposes that the parable is a veritable festival of death... the first one... when the father agrees to die... so the younger son can pad his wallet... and making the older son... the effective head of the household...

In a foreign country... the prodigal lives a life of excess... which kills him... and he comes to himself one morning... realizing... that whatever life he had is over... and sitting next to the hog trough... he looks at his life... and he finds... nothing... and so in desperation over the end of everything that could possibly be called a life... he compiles the first version of his confession... *I am not worthy to be called your son... treat me like one of your hired hands...*

Capon writes... he may understand that he has died as a son... that he has... by his pro-di-gal-ity... lost all claim to his former status as his father's loyal child... but what he does not yet see... is that as far as his relationship with his father is concerned... his lost sonship is the only life he had... and there's no way now for him to be anything but a dead son... and so he concocts a plan for making a quasi-life for himself as a hired hand... son-ship may no longer be available... but hired-hand-ship... may be...

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...

The father sees this corpse of a son coming down the road... and because raising dead sons to life... and throwing fabulous parties for them is his favorite way to spend an afternoon... he proceeds straight to hugs... and kisses... and resurrection...

And in this moment... in the clarity of his resurrection... the boy suddenly understands that he is a dead son... will always be a dead son... and that he cannot... by any effort of his own... or even by any gift of his father's... become a "live" anything else... and he understands too... that if now... in this embrace... he is a dead son who is alive again... it is all because his father was himself... willing to be dead... in order to raise him up... the father is guilty of prodigiousness too... that is... of giving new life...

The next thing that Capon talks about... is confession and forgiveness... we tend to think that we are forgiven because we confess... but Capon asserts that we are forgiven first... he writes... *only when... like the prodigal... we are finally confronted with the unqualified gift of someone who died... in advance... to forgive us no matter what... can we see that confession has nothing to do with getting ourselves forgiven... confession is not a transaction... not a negotiation to secure forgiveness... it is the after-the-last-gasp of a corpse that finally can afford to admit it's dead and accept resurrection...*

Forgiveness surrounds us... beats upon us all our lives... we confess only to wake ourselves up to what we already have...

And there's a third death in this parable... [pause]... all of its life... the fatted calf has had just one purpose... to stand around in its stall... and drop dead at a moment's notice... so people can have a party... Capon writes... this is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world... who dies in Jesus... and in all our deaths... and who comes

finally to the Supper of the Lamb as the *pièce de résistance*... of his own wedding party...

And then we come to the older son... Mr. Respectability... the only living character in the parable... the man with volumes and volumes of records he has kept on himself and everyone else... whose legalistic... rule following... rigid approach to life... could hardly be called living at all... and so when he saw all the celebration... and who it was for... he decided not to dignify its waste... with his presence... in his case... he frantically tries to hold on to what passes for a life... though it's a life that's cheaply made... but is made to look good...

The older brother says to his dad... *your property*... but the property that his brother devoured was no longer the father's... the older brother says *devoured*... and his father answers... what you've been so smug about not wasting all these years... has actually been yours all along...

And so this classic parable of grace... turns out to be a parable of judgment as well... it proclaims clearly... that grace operates only by raising the dead... and those who think they can make it on their own need not apply... and we can simply choose to accept or reject the resurrection that comes to us as gift... nobody will be kicked out for having had a rotten life... because nobody there... will have any other life... but the life of Jesus...

And yes... there is an even deeper way we can understand this parable... if we shift some gears... The Rev. Martin Smith writes that he is haunted by the way that Dutch theologian Robert Adolfs... used the image of the prodigal spending his years in a far country... as a devastating image for the entire sweep of church history... from the conversion of Constantine to our day... the church's alliance with regimes of power... its establishments... its consent to violence... its dependence on structures of privilege... all constituted a devastating repudiation... of the Good News of nonviolent... self-giving

divine love... for which the prodigal's heartbreaking abandonment of his father and home is a poignant image... the father could not constrain his younger son... and for centuries a non-coercive God lets the church persist in its compromises... until disillusionment finally sets in... and the moment comes round for risking the painful journey home...

This afternoon I leave for St. Louis... to attend the National Workshop on Christian Unity... I go representing the Diocese of Western Michigan... and the Diocese of Eastern Michigan... as the Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer... first thing Monday morning there's a training session in ecumenism... with some United Methodists... who... globally... are divided in their response to same gender relationships and ordination... and the proposed full-communion agreement between the Episcopal Church and the UMC may be in jeopardy... the ELCA is already in full communion with the Methodists... and we'll have to see what happens there... but one of the reasons that church is less attractive to younger people and families... is because they see the in-fighting that goes on... and don't want to be a part of that... and there are other trickle-down consequences...

The question... I think... for our time is... what title do we want our story to have... and can we... like the prodigal child... realize that we're already dead... that our modern robes and rings and sandals can't change that... and can we simply accept that God loves raising dead children to new life... and throwing fabulous parties for them... and can we live lives of repentance... and gratefulness... and realize that everything we have... is gift... and can we share that gift... even with those who we think don't deserve it... with those who we think have wasted... what has come to them...

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