

Theme: "The Loving Father"

Introduction

As we continue to examine the portions of Luke's account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27) we come to the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel, a recognizable unit of the story that presents a pair of paired-parables. The first three verses act as the setting in which Jesus teaches. It appears to be to the sinners, the tax collectors and the Pharisees who were muttering about the company Jesus kept. Luke 15: 4-10 relates the parables of 'the lost sheep' and 'the lost coin'. Some suggest better names for these two parables are 'the diligent shepherd' and 'the diligent sweeper'. Then comes the set Gospel reading in Luke 15: 11-32 which recounts the story of what has been traditionally called 'the prodigal son'. However, taken in the context of these three parables, the title of 'the loving father' or the generic term 'the lost is found' is probably a much better title. The parable is in two sections. Verses 11-24 recount the story of the son and his homecoming celebrations put on by his father. Verses 25- 32 speak about the response of the older brother and the altercation he has with his father.

This division within the parable is significant if you look at the two groups of people Jesus is speaking to in the first three verses. On the one side you have the tax collectors and sinners "who were gathering around to hear what Jesus had to say" and on the other hand you had the Pharisees "who were muttering and saying 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'." The parable addresses both groups and we often don't see this differentiation within the parable. The first part is for the sinners and tax collectors and the second part is for the Pharisees.

Middle

This story presents Jesus speaking in relation to two distinct groups in the course of his ministry.

First, there are those who are the marginalised in society and even shunned by self-satisfied and smug, rigidly religious people. These 'sinners and tax collectors' are able to hear the good news that Jesus brings because they are outside the status quo and have little or nothing to lose.

On the other hand, the account refers to the Pharisees and the scribes – that is, those who were quite concerned with proper religion and behaviour. As we meet the second group here they are cast as incapable of hearing Jesus' radical message of God's acceptance of sinners – seemingly because they are overly secure in their own belief and practice.

This presentation is somewhat of a caricature, presenting the worst segment of a group as if it were the whole.

This of course raises the question for us: "Who are the sinners/tax collectors today and who are the Pharisees/scribes?" The answer to this could well be a

little unsettling as we may well find ourselves amongst the Pharisees and the scribes. How do we deal with this?

The other 'tricky' issue in this parable revolves around relationships.

Neither son in this story originally has a real relationship with the father. The younger son views the father as a source from which he can derive sufficient funds to live it up as he pleases. He takes his father's goodness for granted, abuses it, and only in his later sense of sorrow and loss is able to perceive the true character of the one whose goodness he took advantage of.

The elder son can relate to his father only in the sense of being duty-bound, he is more a slave than a son: and so, he never really experiences the love and generosity of his father. The original ways in which we find the two sons relating to their father often are ways in which we relate to God. The parable tells us that in these patterns we have no sense of who God is, and we do not have a valid relationship. On the one hand we are in it to get out of it what we can for ourselves and on the other hand we feel obliged to respond out of duty to God. Neither way works for a valid relationship to occur.

Conclusion

Hence the parable calls us away from where we are to where God wills for us to be. In the same way that the younger son 'came to his senses' as he pondered the reality of the person of his father, we can hear this story from Jesus and realise that God's goodness means that we are forgiven and invited to celebrate with God the establishment of a new, loving relationship. Moreover, as we stand with the older son, overly secure in the knowledge of our faithfulness in service to God, we may see that we are outside the experience of God's grace; but now, God calls us into the joyful establishment of a new sense of God's goodness. We may stand apart from God either in sin or in a sense of religious superiority. In either case, the parable calls us to recognise the separation and see that God wills a new relationship characterised by joy rather than greed or mere duty.

Where are we in this parable? Does it feel like an uncomfortable place?

Just maybe we need to hear afresh that God's all-encompassing love, forgiveness and peace are there for us during our Lenten walk through life. Amen