

“Plenty for Everyone”

Rev. David Gregory

March 31, 2019

Fourth Sunday in Lent



Return of the Prodigal Son
Bartolome Esteban Murillo

First reading

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32, New Revised Standard Version

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, '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.'" So he set off and went to his father. 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. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "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!" And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "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!" Then the father said to him, "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."

Second reading

from Rodney Clapp in *Feasting on the Word*

Every time God's active, stretching, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is less for the rest of us. It means there is more. More wine. More feasting. More music. More dancing. It means another, and now a bigger, party.

During this Lenten season we have been finding our ground in a beautiful journey through the wilderness. And by the way, a wilderness can be a beautiful thing, full of mystery and unspoiled beauty, teeming with things we've never seen before. Hopefully we have developed the eyes to see and the ears to hear a thing or two we've never known before. We're used to certain kinds of images this time of year: Jesus fasting alone for forty days while the devil put him through his paces, or the Israelites wandering, lost for forty years while God sent food that descended each night with the dew, as a generation of grumblers passed from the scene, and a younger—and ostensibly more faithful—crowd moved triumphantly into the promised land. Testings, trials, anxieties, frustrations—these biblical scenes have led us to believe that this season leading up to Easter is meant to be an experience that is somber, austere, and even uncomfortable—all in preparation for the glorious resurrection day, the happy ending that is sure to come.

I won't dispute the fact that wilderness can be challenging, but so is all of life. If we're going to go anywhere at all in this journey, we have to keep traveling to the green growing edge, that dangerous place where the known meets the unknown, and where we are charged with making a choice between what is safe and stable vs. what seems risky and maybe just a little bit exciting. It was risky for the Israelites to step away from the life they knew as slaves in Egypt. Freedom meant that there was danger ahead. The waters of the Red Sea may have parted for them, but that wasn't the end of the story. In fact, it was only the beginning.

Today on the fourth Sunday in Lent, we are visiting a scene that comes to us from Luke's gospel, and is also a reading from the Revised Common Lectionary, meaning that we are joining with the vast majority of mainline Protestants in the hearing of these same words on the same day, something we rarely do here. It's also one of the longest readings I've ever asked of a liturgist, but in the telling of this parable, there just isn't anything that can be left out. The parable of the Prodigal is so well-known, we might be tempted to say, "Oh yeah, I know that already!" But parables, as we have been seeing lately, have so many layers of meaning that I'm certain there's something within this one that we can see with new eyes. Many of the parables were occasioned by some grumbling Pharisees, and this one is no exception. They're busy harrumphing that Jesus's dining habits favor the company of some pretty unsavory characters, like extortioners, half-breeds, and prostitutes, to name just a few. But Jesus saw something human in these people that he often could not find in the religious, morally upright, respectable citizenry, and so he told some stories that were likely to infuriate them even more.

In a culture where a man's entire fortune was likely to go to his firstborn son, there was a man who had two sons, the younger of whom somehow persuaded his father to give him a substantial chunk of money so that he could leave, presumably to find his own fortune. But of course, he had other things in mind, specifically "dissolute living." (What a nice Quaker way of referring to wine, women, and song, without having to say it out loud.) He squandered everything that he had. The King James Bible is even loftier when it says, he "wasted himself in riotous living." (Don't you love it?) So he went off with his father's money

and had a riot. Enough said. And then he got hungry. Really hungry. And his pride was suffering. How could he go back and face his family with what he had done? So he got a job feeding pigs. And there came a moment when what the pigs were eating started to look so good to him that he overcame his pride and said, "I'm going to go home. At least my father's servants have some decent food to eat." As he neared his hometown, his father spotted him from distance and ran to meet him. Without an ounce of recrimination, or a trace of shame or judgment in his voice, he threw his arms around his younger son and wept. And then he instinctively threw a huge party to welcome this child who was finally home, safe and sound.

The older son was less than thrilled. "Look at all I've done for you. I've never even thought of doing anything wrong. I've worked hard. I've been faithful. I've followed the rules. Why haven't you ever thrown me a party?" And the father replies, "Relax, everything I own will go to you now, and all of your needs will be met. But I just had to celebrate this brother of yours who once was lost and now is found." We can speculate on how the story ends, but Jesus left it at that. The message for the Pharisees is clear: "Cool your jets. These are the lost souls who could use a little celebration. Those who are unwelcome, unloved, disrespected and rejected are as deserving of unconditional love as anyone."

Love is not a prize that we win for being good. Love does not depend on how deserving we are. Love is the essence of God, of humanity, of the universe. Forgiveness freely and naturally flows from this energy known as Love, or God, or Light, or whatever you want to call it. It is never spent; it never runs out; and most importantly, it can never be withheld when it wants to flow. We do our level best to block its flow. We build walls and fences. We fight to maintain control of the process. We think we know what everyone deserves, and if we were in charge, well ... they would just have to watch out!

What happens to us when love and forgiveness become the green growing edge, the risky, edgy, exciting place to be? There are some pretty despicable things being done to our nation, to our humanity, and to our planet these days. It is easy for us to let loose in our righteous indignation. We tell ourselves that we are fighting for justice, but as liberal progressives we can at times out-fundamental the fundamentalists. It is our very human nature to project our own intolerance upon others. It feels so risky to love this way, to forgive those who wrong us. What if they don't feel any remorse? What if they take advantage of us? What if they take what we have given them and squander it on themselves? What would Jesus do? I guess he'd just throw a bigger party.



Prodigal Son or Merry Company
Gerrit van Honthorst