

It's About the Father

4th Sunday of Lent, Year C - Luke 15:11-32

preached at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 10, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Let's see a show of hands this morning. How many of you first remember hearing the story from this morning's Gospel lesson before... say, the age of ten? How many of you count this story as one of the passages of Scripture that you already know? How many of you, if pressed, could account for the basic elements of this story, you know, the plot, the characters, that sort of thing?

As for many of you, this story has been among my personal favorites for a *very* long time. From the flannel board drama in Sunday School to Henri Nouwan's meditation on the story to the statue of the return of the prodigal that sits at the center of the Bishop's Garden at the National Cathedral in Washington, this story has had the ability to touch my heart every time I hear it.

And yet, as I looked at this story again this week, as I peered again and again at the small replica of that statue at the Cathedral that sits on my desk, it occurred to me that in spite of how it is labeled in Bibles that *have* such labels, this story is not really *about* the prodigal son. Nor is it about that son and his seemingly more steadfast brother. When all the analysis of the relative merits of the two sons is accomplished, when all the historic context and the literary structure is considered, when all is said and done, this story is simply *not* about two sons, it is about a *father*.

This story is about a father who, because of his love for his son, let him go his own way. In those times, this sort of advanced distribution of the inheritance was well within the bounds of the law. The son had a *right* to ask this of his father. I wonder on how many occasions the young man and his father had discussed his plans, and how many times the father had managed to delay it. I wonder how many ways the father found to tell his son how valuable it was to stay connected, to be part of the community, to be a member of the family. I wonder how many times the father had told his son how much he loved him and wanted what was best for him. But the son had places to go and people to see, and finally demanded of his father, "Give me what will rightfully belong to me and let me get on with my life." Even though the father knew in the depths of his heart that the son's plan would lead him only to pain and grief, he knew just as deeply that he could not hold him and still hold his love. So the father divided his property and gave his son his share. This story is about that *father* who, because he knew that only in freedom to leave could his son be truly free to stay, he let that son go to what he was sure would be his ruin.

This story is about a father who waited for his son to return. In those times, when this sort of distribution had been made, the law held that the son was no longer to be considered as part of the family, he was no longer a son, he was lost. But how this father hoped and prayed that his son would return, that he would come back and again be a part of the family, serving and being served. His arms ached to hold his son again. His belly turned every day as he sat down to his table with one less place prepared. Day after day, month after month, perhaps year after year, the father's heart broke as he stood outside his gates as day turned into night, and stared in the direction that his son had gone, hope and expectation becoming more and more colored with worry and fear. Whenever he looked to the horizon and saw a figure approaching, and it *wasn't* his son, he died just a little more. This story is about that *father* who longed with all his being for the one who was lost.

This story is about a father who ran out to meet his son. In those times, as in our own, a man's dignity and his honor were irrevocably tied together. And yet this father, when at last he saw his son approaching from far away, *ran* to meet him. He didn't turn and bar the door to the one who had turned his back on him. He didn't send his servants out to find out what it was that this stranger son wanted. He didn't wait at the gates to press his advantage, to say, "I told you so." Clothed in the long robes appropriate to a man of his age and wealth and station, this father reached down, pulled his robes up

above his knees and *ran* down the dusty road. The son, dirty and tired, smelling of the filth of the life he had chosen to lead and the life he had been forced to lead, the son tried to fall to his knees to beg for his father to just take him in as a servant. But the father caught his son up in his arms, laughing and crying at the same time, he held him to himself and kissed him. Whatever else happens, whatever their life together holds, this story is about that *father* that loves his son with all his heart.

Don't you see, dear friends, that this story is about *the* Father, not some abstract "Ground of Being," way out there somewhere, but the loving parent who created humankind with the capacity to love, the Father who longs for our love so much that he is willing to let us go our own way, the Father who is willing even to risk that we will *not* return his love in order to claim that which really makes us in his image. This story is about *the* Father, not some bestest buddy who smiles indulgently so long as everyone is "okay" with everyone else, but the absolute Lover of our Souls who longs for us to abandon our self-centered pride and our hypocrisy and turn to him, the Father who waits and watches at the gates for any signal, any sign of our return. This story is about *our* Father, who does not stand on justice but who relentlessly *pursues* us in mercy and grace wherever our wandering lives lead us, it's about our Father who absolutely *runs* to meet us when once again we turn our hearts toward him, it's about our Father who would and *has* given up all claims to retribution for the many, many wrongs we have done to wound him and instead wraps us in his loving arms, wraps us with his whole self, again and again and again... and again.

Here in the closing weeks of our season of examination and reflection as we turn our faces toward the passion and death and resurrection of the Christ, let us remember that that, too, is a story of such a Father – the Father who loves us enough to do whatever it takes to assure us of his love, whatever it takes to bring us home, absolutely *whatever* it takes to hold us in his arms.