

Fourth Sunday in Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
27 March 2022

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In Jewish tradition, who to invite over for supper is serious business. The honor of the guest will result in honor for the family who invited him, and, consequently, the dishonor of the guest reduces the honor of the family. You, therefore, would not invite thieves, prostitutes, tax collectors, people with skin conditions, shepherds, etc. to your banquets. If you are a person of standing in the community, you would be bringing dishonor to your home by inviting and eating with such folks. This is the issue in this parable for these Pharisees and Scribes. How can this man Jesus think of himself as a Rabbi and still eat with these kinds of people? What kind of an example is he giving to others? How can he expect to have followers when he is acting this way?

For the Pharisee, the world is divided into two kinds of people: the righteous and the unrighteous. The righteous were those who followed the law, and were believed to be favored by God who rewarded their righteousness by giving them a good wife, lots of children, financial success, a long life, great honor in the community, lots of friends, etc. On the other hand, the unrighteous were punished by God through poverty, skin conditions, dishonorable families, isolation from the community, etc. The end result was simple: If you were well-to-do and highly respected as a member of society, then you were blessed by God and, therefore, righteous. If you were in one of the proscribed professions, suffered from any skin conditions, or did not have a good reputation, then you were being punished by God, and therefore, unrighteous.

The Pharisees and Scribes want to know why Jesus is eating with these people in defiance of all societal norms. He tells them a story. Jesus said, "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.'" This introduction to the story is meant to arouse anger at the younger brother. It is a provocative opening. The Pharisees and Scribes would have been very angry at the younger brother for several reasons: First, as a younger brother, he is not entitled to inherit, unless it is the father's will to leave him an inheritance. By asking for what "Belongs to him" this man is acting with great dishonor. Second, even if this man was soon to receive an inheritance, inheritances are only given when the father has died. This is the tradition. In a way this man is saying, "Father, I can not wait around until you die, give me my money now!" Wishing the father dead would be the greatest act of dishonor to the father and the household anyone could do. The Pharisees would have been enraged by this opening.

Nonetheless, Jesus continues, "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." By now, the Pharisees and Scribes are beginning to think the Father is crazy. Why else would he divide everything, allow a

portion of the land to be sold, and then allow his younger son to leave the village to go to a foreign territory with all his money? This is very strange. By now, the anger of the Pharisee would be directed both at the son and at the father. This kind of thing is not seen in their culture. Jesus continues, "When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need... He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything." This young man has turned away from everything. His father, his village, his land, and now, he even turns away from his religion and his God. He has chosen to work with pigs an expressly forbidden profession for Jews. Worse of all, he has willingly given up his freedom to become someone's servant. He would even eat the food given to the pigs. He has reached rock bottom and he is rightly punished by God. If the story had ended here, the Pharisees and Scribes would be happy. Here you see an unrighteous man being punished by God for his unrighteousness. But Jesus continues with his story.

"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." Hired hands usually live in a village and get paid a daily wage. This young man has a plan. He will go back home and he will work for his father, live in the village, and eventually, pay his father what he took from him. His plan is to restore his honor by undoing what he did. He wants to redeem himself in accordance with Levitical law (Leviticus 25.) He wants to undo what he has done, even if it takes him his whole life to do it. At an average daily wage, it would in fact take him the rest of his life. The Pharisees in the crowd would have expected the father to be extremely tough. Perhaps refuse to see his son, refuse to give him a job, get him expelled from the village. The son has assaulted the family's honor and the father has the right to avenge his honor.

But "While the son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran and put his arms around his boy 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." The father knows what type of reception the son would get once he reaches the edge of the village. Little children would have ridiculed and mocked him. Older men could have assaulted him and expelled him from the village. By now, everyone knows how unrighteous he had been and how dishonorable. They could have even killed him. For this reason, the father does the unthinkable. He runs to his son. Men of standing don't run, they don't show intense emotions in public, and they don't uncover their skin, which this man would have had to do to run while wearing a long robe. The father acts foolishly in the eyes of the Pharisees and Scribes. He shows no sense.

Jesus then introduces an older son who, "was in the field." When he hears and sees what is going on. He refuses to come in and becomes very angry. Even when his father comes to plead with him he acts angry. He says, "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!" This is how the Pharisees and the Scribes see themselves. For years they have followed the law and kept the commandments. For years they have kept themselves pure, not associating with the prostitutes and tax collectors. For years they have done what God expected from them. They expected the kingdom to be given to them, not to the peasants and sinners. But the father responds, "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."

There is subtle point of criticism Jesus is making here. According to Jewish tradition, it was the job of the Older Son to go looking for the younger son, to facilitate a reconciliation between father and son, and to seek to help the younger son to vindicate his honor and repay his debt. But the older son never does this in the story. he doesn't seek after the younger brother, he does not facilitate a relationship, he does nothing to bring the wayward son back into the fold. he has failed in his duties. he has been so concerned about obeying the Law, that he forgets his duty as a brother and a son. The Pharisees have been so worried about keeping the letter of the law that they have forgotten about the least and the lost among them. In fact, they have built walls of separation between them and their younger brother. In fact, they even refuse to acknowledge their existence or to eat with them. They have failed in their duty to be their brothers and their sisters keepers. They failed as the older brother failed to fulfil the minimal expectations the law demanded of an older brother in this situation.

The attitude of the Pharisees is the true enemy of the story. Jesus, on the other hand, acts like the true older brother. He seeks after the lost. He gives up even his life to find the lost sheep and the prodigal brother. He is the true older brother who restores a relationship between the lost sinners of the world and their dad. This is the truth of this story. We can become so religious that we forget about those whom God has entrusted to our care. I pray this may never be so,

May God continue to bless you. Amen!