

Lent 4C
Luke 15:1-3,11-32

Pastor Chris Bellefeuille
March 17-18, 2007

The Parable of the Prodigal

Theologian and preacher Karl Barth is credited with saying that a preacher should prepare sermons with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Truth be told, that isn't really my favorite way of going about the task. But once in awhile the news and the Gospel form a sort of harmonic convergence that give sermon a particular resonance.

Last Sunday there was a little article in the Star Tribune about a pastor named Roy Ratcliff from Madison, Wisconsin. In April of 1994, Pastor Ratcliff found himself at the Columbia Correctional Institute in Portage, Wisconsin because an inmate had expressed a desire to be baptized. The inmate was a particularly brutal serial killer by the name of Jeffrey Dahmer. Dahmer had been in the media spotlight for months in 1991 for his gruesome crimes. And now he was requesting baptism.

Pastor Ratcliff met with the killer and made it clear that while baptism would cleanse Jeffrey Dahmer of his sins in the eyes of God, it would not make him right with the state. In fact, the pastor agreed with Dahmer that he still deserved to die for his crimes. Forgiveness did not mean there would not be consequences for his sins. And then Dahmer was baptized by full immersion in the whirlpool in the physical therapy clinic of the prison.

For many months after the baptism, Ratcliff continued to meet weekly with Jeffrey Dahmer, until Dahmer was killed by fellow inmates in November of that same year. Dahmer became a faint but chilling legend along the lines of Ed Gein and Ted Bundy. The subject of campfire horror tales. But for Pastor Ratcliff, the decision to baptize and befriend Dahmer would change his life in unexpected and lasting ways.

Pastor Ratcliff continues to be identified as the man who baptized the most vile serial killer in recent history. Some embraced him for it and some shunned him. The article in the paper said "People would walk away when introduced to him or argue that they wanted no part of a heaven that included Jeffrey Dahmer. At gatherings of preachers in the region...one minister from Milwaukee constantly points Pastor Ratcliff out to others and says: Do you know who that man is? Do you know what he did?"

Jeffrey Dahmer is a rather extreme example that stretches the limits of our understanding of God's capacity for forgiveness. Compared to Jeffrey Dahmer, the defiant younger son in Jesus' parable just doesn't seem that bad. And yet his older brother is unwilling to join the celebration of his return, choosing instead to dwell in his resentment. And today we find the older brother alive and well and apparently living in Wisconsin. The older brother made it clear to Pastor Ratcliff that the prodigal forgiveness expressed in the baptism of a killer has no place in his understanding of heaven. And so we ask ourselves, how far can we test the limits of our own imagination about forgiveness and baptism and heaven. Who can we simply not imagine sharing heaven with? Who would it be hard to look across the communion table and see standing there? When it comes time to share the peace of Christ, whose hand do we find it hard to grasp?

These are some of the big and important questions being pressed by this parable of prodigal, reckless forgiveness, belonging and love. And I would guess that most of us don't have to think very hard to answer them. Who is it for you? Who challenges the limits of your imagination? A murderer? A rapist? An addict? A homosexual? A homophobe? An adulterer? A divorcee? A violent spouse or abusive parent? A promiscuous woman? An illegal immigrant? A religious fanatic? A homeless person? A gambler? A liar, cheat or fornicator? A conservative Republican or a liberal Democrat? A Pentecostal, evangelical, arm-waving decision-theology, born again Christian? The neighbor who drives too fast, spends too much and uses more than his fair share of resources? The woman who purses her lips and clucks in disdain at a display of midriff or cleavage on your daughter? The woman who lets her daughter display cleavage or her son walk around with his britches barely hanging on? The kid with long hair and a pierced lip listening to music so loud it thumps your car with lyrics that make your skin crawl?

What do we do if the people who challenge us show up for communion and want to be part of the family? If they want to gather at the Father's table and eat his food and carry his name? Would you find yourself standing outside the party looking in, resenting the celebrating and expense for the sake of a fallen sinner who came back, no questions asked, no apparent expectation of repayment or consequence? Or would you join in celebrating the wandering one?

Here is the thought that has pestered me all week. Do we believe we can be in relationship with God if we are not in relationship with each other? Can we be at God's party if we are not willing to be in relationship with all the defiant sons and daughters that squander all they were given and then come crawling back home when their need is great? To press the question further: can we be in relationship with God if we are not in relationship with the churches on the corner, the evangelicals down the road, the conservatives up the street and the free-thinking liberals in the next town.

God will invite who God will to the party. If we refuse to be in relationship with those who challenge our understanding of forgiveness and belonging, then we choose to stand outside the party where God is celebrating his children. Like the older son, we who consider ourselves faithful have a choice to make. We can be in relationship with God and risk being in relationship with the most challenging sinners or strangers. Or we can choose to stand outside looking in. There is nothing that is easy about this. Justice must be done, people should face the consequences of their sin. We want our faithfulness to mean something. We want to be celebrated. It is hard, hard work to step into such a party.

I had the opportunity to speak on the phone this week with Pastor Ratcliff and we talked about this parable. He said: "There is good commentary and bad commentary in this story. The younger son has bad commentary about himself. He says to his father: 'I am not worthy to be your son.'" The father had good commentary: 'You ARE my son.' That is the divine commentary. It is God who claims us as sons and daughters. It is not our judgment to make. We are not called to dispute the divine commentary."

There is, really, good news for everyone in this parable. If you are the lost, the broken, the estranged one, you can count on God to run down the road toward you with arms outstretched, bearing robes and rings and rich things to eat. No matter how far into sin he fell, the younger son never stopped being his father's son. The father could not gather him back into his arms fast enough.

The father turns to the older boy and says: "Son, you are with me always. All that is mine is yours." The father claims him in a word: "Son." If you are one who strives to be faithful, if you stay close to home and gather regularly at God's table there is good news for you too. You know the joy of living in the abiding presence of God. You have a share of God's kingdom. You are celebrated every day.

The prodigal, reckless, lavish forgiveness and love of God is enough to enfold us all: faithful and fallen. Because in the end we are each of us both faithful and fallen. And we can cling to the promise that no matter how far we fall, no matter how far we may roam, no matter how foolish and selfish we might be, God is ready to run down the road and gather us home in celebration. And we know that there is room for each of us that that table. And do we really want anyone standing outside that party looking in?

Amen.