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Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 31, 2019

Lectionary Year C:
Joshua 5:9-12
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Psalm 32

Leaving the Far Country

In the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, hangs one of Rembrandt's more famous paintings. Six feet wide and eight feet high, it was made by the artist only a couple years before he died. The lighting is dramatic: obscure shadowy figures loom in a dark background; in the foreground are two men, brightly lit and brightly colored; the younger man, dressed in rags, kneeling in front of the older man, who is standing, bent over the other, his hands placed affectionately on his shoulders, drawing him in, toward himself, his soft clothes, toward his warm heart. The younger man's face, his eyes closed, rests against the body of the other. The painting is called "The Prodigal Son." The son has come home.

The prodigal son is maybe the most famous parable Jesus ever told. People who don't know anything much about the Bible know what a prodigal son is, even if they don't know that the story originates with Jesus.

There are two sons in the parable: one asks for his inheritance early and the father gives it to him. He goes on and takes the money and runs, off to a distant country, where he engages in "dissolute living," or as the King James version calls it, "riotous living." St. Luke doesn't tell us the details of what that "dissolute" or "riotous" living consisted of, but it's not hard to imagine: you have to figure that rich, idle, single young men have probably been acting up since time immemorial in some similar ways. But he squanders the inheritance he had been given early, at the same time as the distant country falls on hard times. With no money, no resources, no friends, no patrons, no network, and no safety net, he ends up in the fields feeding dirty pigs for the Gentiles. He was so hungry that he would have eaten the pig slop, if only they would have let him. But no one let him.

He remembers that, back at the home he had left, his father's lowly servants at least had enough bread to eat. They weren't rich, but they weren't hungry either. He gets a speech ready: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son." So, the prodigal son returns, not in victory, but in defeat; not having made a fortune, but having squandered it. And while he was "still far off," the father rushed out to meet him on the road. Not in judgment; not in coldness or indifference: he throws his arms around him, kisses him, holds him close. The son wants to give his speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you," but the he father doesn't even reply to this: he immediately calls for the best robe, for the ring that represents full sonship, the sandals for his tired feet, for the kind of abundant feast only celebrated once a year, for the band to play, for songs to be sung. The son has come home. The father rejoices and his household rejoices.

The fourth Sunday of Lent is sometimes called "Laetare Sunday." Laetare is Latin for rejoice. It serves as a kind of refreshment Sunday (another name by which it is sometimes called). In the

middle of Lent, it is a slight reprieve. Traditionally the Lenten fasts were relaxed on this day; a ray of hope is seen with Easter finally in sight.

This may also be why we hear the prodigal son parable this Sunday. If you've had Lenten austerity on your mind for three and a half weeks now, if you've been subjected to a preacher banging on about mortality and sin and suffering, the prodigal son parable is a reminder that this is all for a purpose: not repentance and self-denial for its own sake, but because if and when we turn in God's direction, even while we are still far off, he will rush to us, put his arms around us, and draw us close. He will have compassion on us, tread our iniquities underfoot, throw our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). Laetare. Rejoice. The Father's arms are open and he draws sinners close to his warm heart, and we can rest our tired heads against him and find rest for our souls because his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

There is also another, complementary, way to read this parable that I think illuminates it, too. In this reading, from Karl Barth (in *Church Dogmatics IV/2*), the son who goes to the "far country" is Christ himself.

Imagine the image in your head, if it is Jesus who is the son in this parable. In the incarnation, he lays aside the safety of divinity, its invulnerability, and travels to the place of iniquity, to the world—to the far country. And what he finds there, in the "far country," is us: the people who raise dirty pigs and participate in dissolute living and then turn our backs on people when they don't have any money anymore and we don't even give them pig slop to eat when they ask. Rich, single, idle young men don't squander their inheritances alone; they find people to do it with; people in the far country. That is where we live.

In his incarnation and ministry, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, in the far country. Not to watch us safely from a distance; not to remain as an outsider, observing disinterestedly. Instead, he set up shop in our very midst, among sinners, and in the passion, he was made "to be sin who knew no sin."

Think of what this means. Jesus, the only sinless one, the only pure one, untouched by the stain of original sin, nonetheless willingly took on all of the world's sin—more than took it on, he was "made to be sin." The sinless one became the most sinful and then accepted the punishment that comes for sin. This is what it means to say that Jesus died for our sins. He became our sins and received our damnation.

Having been made sin, he paid the price for sin, which is death: the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23); the consequence of sin is death. Then he took these sins to the Father, as the prodigal son. And while he was still far off the father rushed to him and drew him close. This is what happened in the resurrection. God the Father has mercy on the Son and raises him to eternal life. He forgives those sins, borne by Jesus, which are ours.

Jesus Christ fully died on the cross and, according to the Apostles Creed, he descended to hell, to the place of the damned, to the place of sin—because he had been made sin who knew no sin. And from hell, from the place of death, from so far off, God forgave the sins, brought him home, and raised him to his right hand.

But these sins that were forgiven in Jesus were our sins. For the Father to forgive and then exalt the son who had travelled to the far country and then come back is for him to forgive and exalt us in turn. See it in this image: see Christ in the distant country, as the prodigal son, out far away, among strangers and sinners, and turning from the place of iniquity and setting his face to go to his Father. He doesn't go alone. In your imagination, picture how all of us residents of the far country who have been living in sin follow him now, having heard the good news, the recognition of our sin and the amazing good news of our redemption. We have heard that he is light and life, to those who

dwell in darkness and death. And so we go with him when he goes back to the Father. We follow him and call him Lord.

We are the guilty. We are the sinful. What can we do? Only one thing: cling to Jesus as he travels home. Hold onto Jesus and don't let him go. And even while he's far off, the one made sin, when God the Father reaches out to him and embraces him, because we're holding on for dear life, the Father can't help but embrace us, too. We won't let go of Jesus, and Jesus won't let go of us, so the Father's arms of love encircle us as well.

If the Father is going to take Jesus back—back from sin, back from death, back from hell—he has to take us back, too. And he does, in Christ: the fatted calf is prepared, we put on the best clothes that are given, the band strikes up, and heaven breaks into song. And we sit and eat at this heavenly banquet because we are forgiven in Christ.

Jesus is the prodigal son. The word prodigal doesn't mean returning or repenting. Prodigal means wasteful, extravagant. The prodigal in the parable wastes his money, uses it on things he doesn't need. Jesus uses what he has in abundance—the mercy of the Father—and uses it on us. He doesn't need to. He doesn't have to. He could push us away if he wanted, I suppose, like the elder son. Instead, the mercy is shared with us for free and another word for that is grace.

Rejoice, at this halftime of Lent. Be refreshed. Live a new life. Don't despair. No matter where you live—the far country or somewhere else—no matter what you do—raise pigs or turn your back on poverty or squander your inheritance—you can always go home with Jesus. Grab on to him and don't let go. Hold onto him and sing. Feel the mercy of God wash over you. Come home. Rejoice.