

Lent 4
18/3/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 15:16-21
Luke 15:1-3;11-32

On living in the mercy of God.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the Scribes were grumbling and saying, "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*"

In response to the most common criticism made of him Jesus tells three parables, all of which depict God as the boundlessly merciful one who searches for the lost. The parable of the Father and the Two Sons is the third of these, and the composition of Jesus' audience provides the key to its message. Some were "sinners" – rule breakers whom the religious people regarded as beyond the pale. Others were rule keepers - Scribes and Pharisees who believed that in welcoming sinners and eating with them Jesus was breaching the rules of religious conduct.

The sinners were most likely children of Israel, people who had grown up in the faith and gone astray in various ways. Consider them as the son who left home. He could have grown the inheritance so carefully gathered by his father but he lost it through dissolute living - unspecified inappropriate behavior or undisciplined habits, nothing so bad or specific as his resentful older brother named. To have ended up feeding pigs for a Gentile would be to have sunk about as low as an Israelite could go. He had embraced a foreign culture at the worst level. We know that he came to his senses and aimed to re-enter his father's house as a slave. The abiding image in this story is of the father who saw him from afar and came out to meet him. There was no suggestion of slavery or conditional re-entry. No Temporary Protection to cover a pending situation. Out of sheer joy over the return a feast of feasts was declared. The fatted calf is a beast set aside and fed with the best grain so that it produces especially tender and tasty meat. Most people would not have been able to keep more than one of these. But with the feast came a ring, robe and shoes signifying complete reinstatement. Pretty good treatment for a dissolute, irreligious, contaminated wastrel, but he did not get this for staying in the far off land. He came to his senses. At the lowest point of his life he realized it would be better to be a doorkeeper at home than to live in the far country of his indulgent, self-interest. And we see that his father had always loved him.

The sinners whom Jesus had table fellowship with would probably have related easily to the son who went away. And they may have experienced the resentment and the ostracism of the religious people whose criticism of Jesus had erupted before, in the synagogue at Nazareth, when he claimed the year of the Lord's acceptance was being fulfilled among them. This parable compliments Jesus' sermon. It asserts that when Jesus receives sinners and eats with them, the mercy of God is being made present and effectual in the world. It does not show us how this is so theologically, or

according to the established rules of religious conduct. It demonstrates it through actions, which embody reconciled relationships. But those who resisted Jesus were no closer to seeing the point.

As we approach Easter this story reminds us the Cross was the price Jesus paid for of a life of identifying with sinners. And it demonstrated what the religious people thought of the mercy of God, fully expressed amongst them in him. The second part of the parable is a sad commentary on the unwillingness of the Scribes and Pharisees to accept Jesus' actions as Godly. Like the son who stayed at home, they had never broken any rules, or messed with exotic cultures. They had been rigorous in their faithfulness to the Covenant. But their anger and resentment over seeing mercy in action became a barrier to sharing the joy that it inspired. Perhaps like the older son, who revealed that his faithful service was being offered not out of gratitude for gifts given but as the joyless service of a slave, they had lost touch with what it really meant to be children of their father.

Every action of the father is pure Gospel, oriented to expressing mercy, and achieving reconciliation. He also went out to the older son. He did not ostracize him for his attitudes or confused loyalties. He affirmed his place in household and offered the same mercy as was given to the younger son. And, in place of the distancing expression "that son of yours" he named him as his brother.

If the father had been more traditional and controlling the first son would not have left, and there would have been no party. Where there was no freedom we would not have seen grace. And if the son had not come to his senses and turned for home, he would never have known of or participated in his father's mercy. Although it seemed to the older brother that the father broke the rules in holding a feast, this generous reaction was born of overflowing joy at a turn of events in which life emerged where he had expected only to see death.

Who was this story for? Was it told to convert dissolute sinners who had strayed from the fold? Was it told for those who had stayed at home but were in danger of being lost in their own wish for certainty and control? The reality is that the New Testament was written to keep before the Church a clear picture of the source of its life, at a time when it was moving away from its roots in Judaism to encounter new cultures in the world. The Church needed to be reminded then as now of the dangers of squandering its inheritance, either by straying from the path, or falling into self-defined sectarian error. We think that evangelism is telling the gospel to those who have never heard it. Here, the gospel is being preached to two groups who have already had it and for different reasons needed to hear it again. We are not in heaven yet and the strict and the profligate, and everyone in between, are continually in need of being renewed in the knowledge that the mercy of God extends to all. Notice that the reception of sinners does not imply the rejection of the good people who have served faithfully for years. God works on the basis of both/and, rather than either/or. This is an important methodological point to take into any debate where there are issues at stake of who is in the church or not, and who is right or wrong. The community of faith is called, not to emulate one son or the other, but to live openness to the merciful love of the father.

What the reception of sinners does call for is a celebration on the part of all who

witness the boundless, reconciling mercy of God at work in the world. In Joshua the people enter a new land and celebrate by having their first meal, which reminds them of the grace that brought them from a far country, through the wilderness, to the promised land. The land, for us, is a state of grace rather than a place. The meal signifies a new life, a state of being forgiven and free. The same idea emerges in the parable. A meal is set for the son returned, and others are asked to share it in the same spirit of generosity that comes from the heart of the father. Eating and drinking together is a sign of the merciful love of God, given to us all. A powerful sign of what it means to share the Eucharist.

We are half way through our Lenten journey. These days take us through territory that gives us the opportunity to renew our understanding of what it means to follow in the way of Christ and live in the gift of God's reconciling mercy. As we continue on towards Easter, God grant this gift may be renewed in us, and fit us to be worthy ambassadors of the reconciliation.