

I Cor. 10" 6-13

Luke 15: 11-32

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Most of us are acquainted with the old adage “familiarity breeds contempt”. Whether or not this is true seems questionable. But familiarity with persons, places, activities, and stories does often lead us to make assumptions. We can know any of those so well that we miss nuances and new aspects of each simply because we think we already have experienced everything they have to offer us. How often do we have a conversation at the end of the day that follows a certain sameness and regularity only to discover later that we did not hear a unique concern of our friend or spouse? We have been lulled into expecting predictability. This past week an email circulated at work titled “ponderisms”. Here are a few of those: “Does pushing the button in an elevator more than once make it get there any quicker?, There are two kinds of pedestrians: the quick and the dead, and “I used to eat a lot of natural foods until I learned most people die of natural causes”. Why do we laugh at those? It is because the punch lines are not what we anticipated. Something new and unexpected is heard. Nearly any of us here today could tell this Gospel story because we know it so well. But let me invite you to look for the unfamiliar; the surprises which may be just what we need most to hear and experience and which is at the heart of what Jesus is giving to us.

“Anthropos tis eixen duo uious”; A certain man had two sons. Thus begins this astounding parable told by our Lord. Jesus does not say “a man” or “any man” but rather a “certain” man. That sets the stage for everything we hear. It is the backdrop of the story. It is the character of that certain man that makes the parable so very powerful, and it is the character of this father that reaches out to us and draws us to a sense of comfort and hope as we yearn and search for answers to the questions that disturb us. Recent N.T. scholarship has begun to refer to this as the Parable of the Waiting or Loving Father. That is exactly right. You see, there are two prodigals in this account, not one. Each of them takes a different path in attempting to find the “good life”; a fulfilling life, however in the end it is not their actions that determine the outcome, but the open extended arms and heart of their father who makes life whole and complete. This is a father who refuses to be discounted by their attitudes and behaviors, whose love **for** them out distances his desire for something **from** them, and who will not be persuaded to give up on his own. This is most assuredly “a certain man”, unlike any other! (By the way the same “certain” is used in John’s Gospel when Jesus says, “Greater love has no man but that he lay down his life for his friends—It is a certain man who does so!)

What is it that our Lord is up to in telling this account? To be sure he is countering the Pharisees who have just criticized him for eating with the lowest of the low. It is equally clear that all of us who hear this parable will recognize in the two brothers elements of our own life journeys. We identify with one or both of the brothers because we are them. All of that is true. Where then, is the surprise? Maybe one way of seeing it is to ask a question. How would you engage and deal with these two children? One has taken part of your retirement on a schedule far ahead of your plans, has skipped town, does not write to let you know how he is, blows it faster than you could earn it, and now shows up smelling to high heaven. He is sorry for his fool hearty ways, but that does not change the losses. The other is in bondage to resentment, anger, and is frustrated that the future he expected has not come to fruition. He even refuses to acknowledge the returned wanderer as his brother and slanders him by accusing him of sexual license, which is never a part of the story

until he tosses it out. And you are situated right between them. You watch the tensions rise even as your own heart is filled with joy at the safety of your child. What would be your response? What would you say and do in the midst of that conflict?

Jesus simply says that the father's love for both is so all-encompassing that he reaches out to both with everything he has—with all his substance. We have a word for it—GRACE. And it is grace and that alone that has the power to change their circumstances. They have already demonstrated their failures. Those in earshot of this story would surely have wondered what father in their culture would have reacted in this way, and that is the surprise. We talk much about grace in the church, and we hope it is true. But it throws our world out of balance. We live in a culture of competition and of winners and losers, and this often defines our sense of how the world should be. Grace means that our ways of fairness are not God's ways. There is an inherent sense of injustice by the world's reckoning here. Had the younger brother returned in morbid repentance wearing sackcloth and ashes it might seem a little more appropriate. Had the father scolded and cajoled and demanded some form of repayment it might go down a little easier. "That young scrapper got what was coming to him" would lead us to sense that justice had been served. And in our own setting that may well be called for in some circumstances. But God does not play by our sense of fairness, but out of His love and mercy. That is the surprise! After all we should ask, what do any of us do about those sins for which can never make repayment. This is the scandal of grace!! For the father, who is the center of this story, recovering his children is more vital than any other thing, even His honor—their recovery is His honor. In fact all else is counted as less, even their failures.

Notice what the father says of his child—"This, my son who was dead, is alive, who was lost, is found". This is the second surprise in the parable. It is the realization on our part that there is something worse than death; it is being lost. It is wandering through life not knowing we belong. For the older son it is standing in the presence of belonging and love beyond measure and being guided by anger, hostility, a judgmental heart, and separation. And there is one other surprise. It is the discovery that there is something better than merely being alive and going through the motions of living. It is being found. Jesus tells us the father sees his children from far off and goes out to greet and welcome them, and us. It is not so much that we need to figure out who God is—God already knows that. Rather it is that God knows who we are, and wants us anyway.

Perhaps you, like me, gravitate to this parable because you know the paths you have trod. You know well the failures, the darkness of your own souls, time lost wandering in places and ways that have dimmed your vision of who you really belong to. But a "certain father" has not forgotten you, or me.

The daughter of the great Russian author, Dostoyevsky, wrote in her biography of him about the great struggles and failures in his life; they were many and deep. Upon returning from Siberian exile he fell ill and was dying. "He made us come into the room," his daughter recalled, "and, taking our little hands in his, he begged my mother to read the parable of the prodigal son. He listened with his eyes closed, absorbed in his thoughts. 'My children,' he said in his feeble voice, 'never forget what you have just heard. Have absolute faith in God and never despair of His pardon. I love you dearly, but my love is nothing compared with the love of God. Even if you should be so unhappy as to commit some dreadful crime, never despair of God. You are His children.

SERMON - THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 13 AUGUST 2017  
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina  
Father Mark Menees, D.D.

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“There is a certain father who has many children”. Amen+