

Trinity 9-2020

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+

In the first half of the last century Norman McLean, the American author wrote an autobiographical novel titled, "A River Runs Through It". It is, to say the least, a captivating story, which has been made into an award winning movie. McLean left his home to study at Dartmouth College, earning both Bachelors and Masters degrees, and eventually was given an appointment to teach literature at the University of Chicago. This was no insignificant accomplishment for a boy raised on the frontier of Montana and essentially home schooled by his Presbyterian clergyman father, who was hard nosed and forced Norman to write and re-write essays always using the fewest and clearest words possible. The Reverend McLean would read the essays, cover it with correction marks in red, and then say, "Now use half the words". On the surface the book is about fly fishing in the rugged Western rivers for trout. But the real story is about the divergent and clearly opposite lives of 2 brothers from the same family and their long suffering and ever faithful father. Norman, the oldest, while mischievous was typical of older children. He sought to please and achieve the best of which he was capable. He gave of himself for his brother and his father and mother. He followed the rules laid down for him and found success. His younger brother was free spirited, took risks at every turn, and lived against the stream when at all possible. His father was constantly called to the jail to bail him out. He gambled recklessly, drank alcohol profusely, and his judgment in friends could have not been more misplaced. In the end it costs him his life. At the funeral, his father remarks how it is that sometimes those closest to us remain the greatest of mysteries. Yet the boy remains his son, and even now is loved beyond words. McLean ends his story with the phrase, "Even now, I am haunted by these water", and he is referring not to the rivers where he fishes, but to the events of his life through which he has waded and swam.

It is true, is it not, that often the greatest mysteries we encounter in life are not so much those asked about the creation of the world, or how things work, but rather why we and our companions do the things we do and make the decisions we make? How frequently do we look at where we are and ask, how did I get to this place in my life? In some respects, we are a mystery and quandary. We lose our way and spend our selves quite literally on things that do not matter.

Something very similar appears before us today as we read the Parable of the Prodigal. While we may assume we get the message immediately, the truth is there is a mind boggling number of ironies present in Jesus' story. First, we need to ask just which character is the prodigal—is it the younger son or the older, or perhaps the Father, since his behavior is outlandish. No self-respecting Jewish or Middle Eastern patriarch would ever have been expected to act in this way, so who can he possibly be? Then the younger son does the unspeakable; he goes to his father and asks for his share of the inheritance. He is not asking for an advance on his allowance; he is essentially saying to his father, "I know you aren't dead yet, but let's pretend you are". His request is literally translated, "Give me, from your essence—your very being—what I ought to have". He will eventually get the very thing he unwittingly asks for—the essence of his father, but it is not what he originally thought it would be. Later in this little novel we are told that the son squandered his essence—his very life, so not only has he stolen his father's life, but now he destroys his own; He "gathers together" what he has taken and then scatters it. And ALL of this is just the beginning, for the older son does what one might have anticipated from the father and disowns his brother when he says, "this son of yours". And, we have his complaint about not having the goods to make merry with his friends—not with his father—so his concern is really self-centered. The ironies

here are enough to make our heads spin, so we, too, need an instant replay. Let me suggest that we freeze the picture so we can see the absolute center of the action.

“Anthropos tis eixen duo uiou”; 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 at least 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! Surprising!!

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 unexpected; the unnoticed? 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, will not return phone calls, and blows money 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. He has stayed home alright, and perhaps you wish he would move 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. Nothing about their efforts will change the situation. It will require a remarkable action from another to heal the brokenness.

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 unexpected. We talk much about grace in the church, and we hope it is true. But too often it is given to others, and we cannot believe it is for us. Why is that? Perhaps 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 where accountability is necessary. 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 we 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 image caught 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 perhaps for some of us it is never quite being able to accept that we are loved as we are in this moment and in the state we find ourselves in.

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. This is not a comment about geography or keen eyesight. It is a promise that our Father (remember we pray that) longs for us no matter what or where we have wandered. 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 you would undo, the darkness of your own souls, the time lost wandering in places and the ways that have dimmed your vision of who you really belong to. But a “certain father” has not forgotten you, or me. That is just almost too good to be true and too true according to the Gospel to settle for anything else.

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