

March 31, 2019 - Lent 4C

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-31

“Never Measuring Up” - Rev. Seth Jones ©

Today, we hear what is probably the most familiar parable in the Gospels, the Prodigal Son parable. It is funny we call it that because it draws the focus to the first son, even though Jesus tells us “*There was a man with TWO sons...*” We focus heavily on the first son, and I am not so sure that does justice to the story being told and what is intended.

Before we get into the story, though, let’s back up for a moment. So many things depend on context, and the context today is the deep offense the Pharisees and the scribes have about what Jesus is doing. He is eating with sinners and tax collectors. They follow him around and listen to everything he has to say. These are horrible people. They break religious and secular laws. They take advantage of other people and get their money by unsavory means that may be legal, but certainly distastefully. They are poor and live on the edges of society. These are the people who hang with Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes and people of good standing are disgusted.

For us today, then, perhaps a better way to begin this section of the Gospel, so we can access it better, would be:

Now, Michael Cohen, Paul Manafort, their lackeys and hit men, Stormy Daniels and all her stripper friends, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Jeff Sessions, some ex-cons and drug users, some alt-right neo-fascists and some illegal immigrants were coming near to listen to Jesus. And you and I were grumbling saying, “Look at the kind of people attracted to Jesus. Is anything valid about what he says when they take him seriously?”

Jesus knows his audience well, and at this point in his ministry, as we draw closer to the Cross, he is ramping up the offense that his words and actions will take with the religious leaders of the day. This story is the culmination of several confusing parables, and is the most offensive of the three.

The offense we take against others is often an external expression of how others do not *measure up* to our ethics, our traditions, our cultural rules, our ideas about success, our expectations of behavior, our beliefs. *Measuring up* turned inward means we are constantly seeking the approval of other people in the world, knowing deep inside we are not good enough, we haven’t done enough, we don’t know enough, we have done too many wrong things. Jesus’ parable of the two sons puts everyone who hears it in a cage of their own making. Either we are offended by the first son, or we are the second son and are thus confronted by our lives of continual offense.

We don't talk about the second son much, but let's think about him for a little bit. The second son is the eldest. HE is the inheritor of the father's legacy, but the father has given part of that inheritance to the younger son, *before the father has died*. The uncaring approach to tradition and expectation here is extreme. The offense to the elder son, and to the traditions of the day is enormous. And yet the elder son stays on the farm, follows all the rules, does what his father says.

Imagine what this is like for him. The resentment to the offense festers and builds for years and years. Then, the younger son comes home. And what does the father do? The father throws a party. A PARTY! for this man who took his father's legacy, burned it up with prostitutes and alcohol and Lord knows what else, ends up living with the worst of all possible animals - pigs, and then comes home looking for help. The elder son says to his father,

"Look, I have worked like a slave for you. I have done everything you told me. I don't even have a goat to show for all that work. But when YOUR SON comes home after spending all your money on whores and drugs and whatever, you throw him a huge party."

Notice the son says to the father, *Your son*, about his younger brother. The father responds by saying, *This brother of yours...* The displacement of relationship is powerful. But the father responds by evoking one of the oldest stories in the tradition, that of Cain and Abel. Remember Cain's question about Abel? *Am I my brother's keeper?* God's answer is always the same to Cain and to us, *Yeah, you are. You really, really are. This brother of yours, YOU are his keeper.*

The statement by the elder son is filled with years of resentment and hurt and offense. The elder son's statement suggests that, before all this went down with the younger brother, this was not a very stable family to begin with. Everyone is struggling in this story, and perhaps no one more than the father.

How do you balance and deal with a son who wants everything now and a son who believes he is owed everything later? How do you handle a son who does every offensive thing and a son who is offended by everything? It is a cauldron for resentment, offense, difficulty and potential harm. No one can *measure up*: the prodigal son, because of what he has done; and the elder son, because of what he feels has been done to him.

This season of Lent we have been discussing things we would rather not talk about. In this story, which we have all heard so many times, we want to jump ahead to the father running out to the younger son, and talk about that and what it represents. And that is not a bad thing. I have preached it that way several times. God's love, reconciliation, all

that. But the impact of what the father is doing is accentuated, amplified, when we understand the level of offense occurring here.

What could Jesus be up to here?

We need to understand, whether it is 28 AD or 2019 AD, that all of us have asked, *What could possibly be offensive about God's grace?* We like God's grace to show deserving people in difficult situations getting what they deserve, which is things going right, good things coming to them. Then, we hear a story about someone who embezzled millions of dollars, who lives in a mansion bought with money soaked in deception and manipulation, and is near death. We hear that this person converted to the Christian faith just days before he died of a horrible, long-term disease. He is proclaimed saved, reconciled in Christ. How do we react? I have had people tell me they do not believe in deathbed conversions because it is offensive to their understanding of God's justice. The offense to our theological and ethical sensibilities is too great to contemplate.

Or we hear a story about someone who has killed many people. While in prison, a Baptist minister convinces this man, this serial killer, to be baptized and become a Christian. After the baptism, 2/3s of this minister's church leave and the killer is himself killed in a bathroom with a baseball bat. This is the story of Jeffrey Dahmer, notorious and horrific serial killer from Wisconsin. The offense that God's grace would be shown to someone so despicable was so huge that a pastor lost his church and the one who accepted God's grace lost his life. What do you think? Who deserves God's grace?

Fred Craddock, in his commentary on Luke, puts it this way:

One (offense) is the party. It was the music and dancing that offended the older son. Of course, let the younger son return home. Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of the penitent returnee, but where does it say that such provisions include a banquet with dancing? Yes, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not fatted calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a new ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing. Has the party cancelled the seriousness of sin and repentance?

Yes, yes, the party has cancelled the seriousness of the sin. The measures we require do not match the overwhelming loving kindness which is provided by God's grace, the measure of Heaven compared to the measure of Earth.

How does God respond to offense, at least in this story? Not by measuring our needs to God's, not by accepting what we require for people to measure up. Instead, God just provides more loving kindness. The very thing that offends us the most increases the more offended we become. For every centimeter of our offense, God measures a meter of

grace, and for every centimeter our offense increases, God measures two more meters of grace. Isn't this what the father does in our story today?

The father doesn't just go out and show grace to the younger son. The elder son, when he sees the party, refuses to go in and participate in the celebration. In the same way the father goes out to the returning younger son, the father also goes out to the angry son. The father assures the elder son that all that the father has is also his. There is enough loving kindness, enough grace, to go around to the whole family.

I believe one of the hardest things for us to do, for ourselves, is to accept God's loving kindness, God's grace, for the gift it is. We feel like we need to create rules around God's grace so others measure up, even while, inside, if we are honest with each other, we don't feel like we measure up at all to what we have received from God. To simply accept the grace we have been given yanks us out of the water we have been breathing and into the air of the Holy Spirit. It is really very hard to adjust to the new atmosphere where the air we breathe is laced with God's love and freedom all the time. We long to breathe water again. It seems easier, for some reason, to just breathe the water of offense and measuring up.

But, as Paul says, in Christ, we are now a new creation. Having received the grace and loving kindness of the Father, *everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (2 Cor 15:17). The old measures no longer apply. In fact, measuring itself no longer applies. In Christ, we never measure up because measuring itself is no longer a valid approach to understanding anything.

Reconciliation, forgiveness, means having to let go of all the measurements we've put in place. When we are in a measuring mindset, either I measure up or you measure up or they measure up, or I, you, or they don't. This is a miserable way to live. Think of these brothers. The prodigal son gets what he THINKS he's owed and it doesn't go well for him. The elder son lives a life of resentment because of what he thinks HE'S owed and hasn't received. It doesn't go well for him, either. They're both miserable. Neither of them measure up.

But in Christ, reconciliation, forgiveness, is the flavor of the air we breathe now. Like the elder son, we have been invited to an incredible party, a party where not just a child of God who was dead is now alive, who was lost but now is found, is celebrated, but everyone who attends is celebrated. The younger son and the older son, and therefore you and I, are celebrated at this party the father is throwing.

We become ambassadors of Christ by learning to accept the gift of God's grace without measure. Then, we extend that grace to all whom we meet. It is likely the more we do

this, the more offensive it becomes. *Who did you invite to our party? Seriously? Her? Don't you know she _____? Don't you know we can't have her here?*

We can stand outside the house with the elder son and pant and swear and curse the sinners and horrible people who would participate in such a ridiculous party, or we can go inside and join in the celebration.

Either way, the Father provides the celebration of the promise already received for those of us who went and spent all we had been given on offensive things, and the Father provides the celebration as an assurance of the promise already received for those of us offended by those who have done the offensive things. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, *In my Father's house, there are many rooms.*

It is a really big house, and there is a really big party going in there. Maybe it is for you. Maybe it is for us.

Will we hang outside, nursing our resentments, our many offenses against the people of the world, and all the mismeasures we make, or will we give up the offense and the measuring of people and things, and join the party?

It really is up to us. Either way, the Lord welcomes you.

Amen.