

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
March 14, 2009
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Lent 4, Year C

Mary was two years old and Kendall was four when we explained to them that Mommy was going to spend five days a week at a place called Virginia Seminary to learn to be a priest. We explained that I would come home on weekends. But since theological education and priestly formation are pretty abstract concepts to preschoolers who miss their mommy, we also told them that they would spend some weekends at the seminary with me so they could see what it was like. They could bring their sleeping bags and spend the night in my dorm room, and eat some meals in the refectory, and meet my friends. The first weekend they visited me at the seminary, we gave them special treats they didn't get at home, such as sugary cereal for breakfast (which turned out well) and jumping on the bed (which did not). They brought toys with them, and we had fun playing with them. They brought their little sleeping bags and their pillows, and when bedtime came we got them all tucked in. Then Kendall asked me to read them their bedtime story.

I looked up at my bookcase in search of a book I could read to my preschoolers. I saw six volumes of Calvin's *Institutes of Religion*. I saw Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance*. I saw *The Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church*. I realized that none of the books in my theological library contained a story. I thought that this was too bad, especially since when Jesus wanted to give people a theological education, what Jesus did was to tell them a story. So I decided to do something very old-fashioned, and tell my children one of the stories Jesus told. The story that came to mind was the most familiar of all of Jesus' stories: the story of the Prodigal Son.

This well-known story wasn't hard to remember. I told them about the father with the two sons, the younger son's asking if the money he would normally get after the father died could be given to him right away, the trip to the faraway country, the spending all the money on big parties. I told them about the son having to feed the pigs and still not having enough money to buy food. About the son's idea of apologizing to his father and asking to be only a servant. Then the father's running to hug him, about the ring and the robe and the fatted calf for the feast in his honor. I told them about the older brother's

anger. I told them about his complaints: that he had worked hard and the father had never given him even a goat for a party with his friends, and then when the other son comes back after wasting his money, the father puts on a big feast and serves the fatted calf. I told them about the father's reply, "Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to have a big celebration, because your brother was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found." And Kendall, lying in her sleeping bag, waited for a while and then said, "Is that the end of the story?" And I said, "yes." And Kendall asked, "But what did the older brother do?"

It was a four-year-old who recognized immediately what I had missed for all those years: this is a story which has no conclusion. I had learned about Aristotle's theory of dramatic structure in my literature classes in grad school; I'd even taught my high school English classes about Freytag's pyramid and the role of denouement as the final stage in literary structure, but it was my preschooler who knew that stories are supposed to have a conclusion and the conclusion of this story is missing: "Is that the end of the story?"

So this four-year-old's first question taught me about the literary structure of this story, and her second question taught me about the theology of the story. "But what did the older brother do?" This story, which was so familiar to me, was a story I had always thought of as "the parable of the prodigal son." But because Kendall was hearing the story for the very first time, she was drawn into the deeper meaning of the story: that lovely as the story of the prodigal son is, ultimately this is a story about the older brother. "But what did the older brother do?"

To answer both of her questions about the end of the story, I went back to the beginning, to Luke 15:1-3. "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So Jesus told them this parable: 'There was a man who had two sons....' Jesus' listeners, who in this case happen to be Pharisees and scribes, are grumbling because Jesus welcomes sinners. So Jesus tells them a story in which a father welcomes a sinful son, and the older brother grumbles about welcoming the sinful son, and the father tells the grumbling, angry older brother, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice,

because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” Is that the end of the story? The real answer is, “No.” The absence of the end of this story is not an accident, not an oversight, not something lost from the text over the course of history. Instead, Jesus’ ultimate purpose in telling this story is to draw his listeners to the point of the story where the ending ought to be, to draw them to the point where they ask, “So what does the older brother do?”

The ultimate point of the parable is that in telling it, Jesus is asking his listener, “So, older brother, what do you do?” The reason Jesus doesn’t tell us how the story ends, is that the one who determines how the story ends, is each of us. You’re the one who writes the end of the story. Does the older brother stay mad? Argue about the injustice? Go off alone? Or try to join the party?

We’re used to thinking of the Pharisees as people who are different from us, people who lived in a different time, a different place, a different religion, a different culture. And while all those things are true, the attitudes that the Pharisees represent are part of the nature of every human being.

If someone has ever treated you the way the older brother treats his sibling, this parable can be a source of great comfort, to know that even when someone else wants to exclude or condemn you, God welcomes you with magnanimous love, with generosity, and even with overflowing joy! When sin is participation in the mechanism of exclusion, as James Alison puts it, God, like a loving father, embraces his younger son, and pleads with his older son not to exclude his brother, not to participate in the mechanism of exclusion.

But here’s the hard part. While each of us has had times when we have been condemned or excluded, like the younger brother, each of us has also had times when the older brother wells up in us. If we have ever thought, “How can they call themselves Christians when they....” that’s the older brother in us. If we have ever thought, “I would never do such a thing as....” That’s the older brother in us. Ironically, if there is someone who has acted like an older brother guilty of the sin of exclusion, and we hold on to our anger at that person, that too is the older brother in us.

It is important to note that in the older brother’s experience, there has been no apology from the younger brother. The older brother was not there on the road, and so as

far as he knows there has been no confession and no repentance. The father asks the older brother to forgive and to welcome, even when the older brother thinks his sibling feels no guilt.

My book group has been reading the book *Amish Grace* which is about the way the members of the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania forgave the man who shot little girls in the small Amish schoolhouse there. As I was reading this beautiful narrative, I wondered, what are the reasons to not forgive? I can see the reasons for not putting oneself into a situation in which one can get hurt again, but that is not really the same thing. What would the reasons be for not forgiving?

I've said in the past that every insult and every bitter argument comes down to the same four-word sentence: "I'm better than you." And it may be that our reason for not forgiving is that when someone has insulted or hurt us, holding a grudge enables us to hold on to our feeling of "I'm better than you." If we hold on to thoughts about how bad the other person is, it enables us to keep thinking of ourselves as better than the other person.

Oddly, this usually goes along with feelings that we are not loved enough, as it does for the older brother, who says, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him." We can see the attitude of scarcity here—"you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends"—but as the story goes on the sense of scarcity seems unwarranted. We find out that the older brother could have had a goat to serve at a celebration with his friends, all he had to do was ask and his father was ready to give it to him. As his father tells him, "Son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours." Right below the surface of the older brother's anger is his real fear, a fear that there is a scarcity of his father's love, a fear that despite all his work to earn that love, he has not gotten what he deserved. And the father's answer is the same, "Son, you are always with me and all that I have is yours." You can have all the goats you want. You can have all the love you want. It is a message of abundance.

Do you feel that you do not deserve to be forgiven for what you have squandered? Then listen to the comfort and welcome of the parable of the prodigal son. Do you feel that other people do not deserve to be forgiven? Then listen to the comfort and welcome of the parable of the older brother. God has started the party. There is music and dancing.

Is that the end of the sermon?

So what did the older brother do?