

Scripture Reading For Sunday, July 3, 2016

Luke 15: 1-32 – The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ’ So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘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!’ Then the father said to him, ‘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.’ ”

Perhaps the easiest explanation of the parable I read this morning is the one most of us were taught in Sunday School – probably by Jenny Webster. That’s the story of a forgiving father – *God* – who welcomes his repentant son – *you and I* – back into the family after the son squanders his inheritance. The boy paid a high price for his actions – starving, sleeping with pigs – and has come home filled with regret for and awareness of his sin. The only difficulty in this telling is the inability of the older brother to also forgive his younger sibling.

As far as it goes, that’s a fine – if simple – explanation of the parable. But what if we did what I asked our kids to do during this morning’s Time for Children? What if, like their ice cream, we tipped it just a bit – maybe not all the way upside down, but just enough so we could look underneath it, and maybe gain just a bit more insight into what it might mean to us today.



Kenneth Bailey, author of *The Cross and the Prodigal*, says that in the time of Jesus, men would never run like the father in the parable did, because to do so, they would have had to hitch up their robes and expose their legs, and it was humiliating and shameful for a man to show his bare legs in that culture. Bailey believes Jesus told us the father ran exactly this way – exposed legs and all – so he could get to his son before anyone else in the community did. Bailey suggests the father may have done this because in those times, if a Jewish son lost his inheritance to Gentiles, the members of the community he lived in would perform a ceremony in which they would break a large pot in front of him to symbolize his complete rejection by them. By running to reach his son first and accepting him with open arms, the father may well have been signaling the others that he was taking his son’s shame upon himself, and making it clear to everyone that his son was to be welcomed back *without consequence*. Bailey theorizes that maybe Jesus was trying to point out that the father in this parable – again, *God* – has run to each one of us through the crucifixion of Jesus, and in doing so has forgiven us for our sins.

The meaning behind Bailey’s explanation of the parable isn’t really any different from the original one we learned in Sunday school, but the introduction of historical and cultural facts add credibility to our original understanding of the parable. As we do so often in matters of faith, we welcome facts that prove our understanding is correct, rather than questioning how that original understanding might be inadequate.



Indulge me for a moment, as I go upside-down with this parable, and suggest that Jesus might have had a completely different lesson in mind when he shared it...

- What if the younger son was “called” to explore beyond the confines of his father’s home, because he was feeling stifled by the rules that didn’t allow him to express the individuality that would truly allow him to work out his own salvation?
- What if during his time in his father’s house he developed such a hunger for serving God’s creation that he had no choice but to demand his inheritance, and what if his inheritance wasn’t actually money, but was instead knowledge of the incredible, unconditional love that God offered *to everyone, without exception*?

- What if “he squandered his property in dissolute living” didn’t mean he was wasting his money on prostitutes and sinners, but instead meant that he was spreading the good news of God’s love to those who needed most to hear it?
- And what if we tip this story all the way over and suggest that the father Jesus spoke of represented not God, but the Pharisees who controlled all facets of the Jewish faith at that time, and that the older brother represented all those who blindly followed their rules and regulations without question?
- What if the younger, prodigal son was Jesus himself, and rather than running out of money he had actually dared to dream of returning to his father’s house to encourage everyone there to follow his lead and embrace the life of service to others he had come to know was God’s call to everyone. This would mean that Jesus was imploring the Pharisees, through the telling of this parable, to welcome him into their home – the Temple – with open arms, and plan a great feast in his honor for he had found new ways to share with everyone the good news of God’s unconditional love for all.

If all those *what ifs* were true, we can recognize that Jesus sharing this parable in a public space, in front of the Pharisees, was an extremely confrontational thing to do. And that might change forever the way we look at this familiar story.



Don’t we as a church, as the body of Christ in our world, have a moral responsibility to take a fresh look at *everything* we believe? After more than 2000 years, aren’t we called to pause and reevaluate everything we do as a church? I believe we are, and I believe we have a responsibility to do so *carefully, respectfully, and lovingly*.



Think about it...our faith tradition is called “*protestant*” because those who came before us and created our branch in the Christian family tree were *protesting* the excesses and abuses of the Catholic Church. Few of us here today would agree with the Catholic Church’s views on divorce, or a woman’s role in the church, or mandatory celibacy for priests, yet when we look to God’s word to study those very issues, we open a book that was heavily edited, formed, and put forth by the same Catholic church whose thinking we feel is so limited in so many other ways.

First Council of Nicaea in 325, called by Roman Emperor Constantine to begin a compilation of the rules and regulations of the Christian church, and out of this grew a movement to canonize – or decide which books would be included in the Bible. Don’t we have a responsibility to find out what was left out, and why? Why, for instance, don’t we read the lost Gospels of Thomas, Judas, or Mary? After all, these gospels weren’t *lost*, they were *denied*, because they didn’t support the picture of faith men in power were trying to paint many, many years ago. Isn’t it incumbent upon us to examine whether the faith story we have been given is one we can live comfortably with today?

Our faith journeys should never be complete, we should forever be putting together everything we come to know is right – *carefully, respectfully, and lovingly* – to form a faith that is liveable, vibrant, relevant, challenging; and we should live that faith every day in our world.



As you consider this idea of upside-down change, I'd like to share the story of one of the students I taught this year.

Destiny was a 13-year-old eighth-grader who, like most eighth-graders, thought she had everything all figured out. She lived a half mile from the school, which made it easy for her to get herself up in the morning and walk herself to school every day, although she was frequently late. Her life wasn't easy, but through years of trial and error, she had come to realize that while she couldn't stop the adults around her from making bad choices, she could avoid the pain those decisions brought into her life by shutting down emotionally, and keeping everyone at a distance so they would never know what she really felt. This was her way of coping with a lifetime of painful disappointment.

She and I did battle repeatedly during her 7th-grade year. I came to understand that she knew what she was doing was not helping her prepare for life after middle school, but she was determined to do it anyway. I made it clear that I would not let up on her, so we would continue to knock our heads together until she decided to make better choices. Ultimately, we agreed that we would recognize that we respected and cared about each other, and that we would both do our best to make the rest of her time in our school as productive as it could be.

At my school, we start Friday mornings with what we call our Advisory Groups. These groups are made up of 8-10 students and one teacher. These weekly 45-minute sessions afford us an opportunity (outside a strictly academic setting) to address successes and failures the students had that week, and their concerns for the upcoming week.

I had a notoriously tough group of kids in my Advisory Group, and Destiny was just about the toughest. In spite of my best efforts, Destiny often ruined our Friday mornings by setting a horrible tone from the minute she entered the room – she sucked her teeth, she rolled her eyes, she banged her chair against the desk, and every week she refused to share...and she did so in a way that made it clear to others that it wasn't safe for them to speak freely either.

My Advisory was falling apart and I didn't know what to do. With the help of a colleague, I turned my thinking upside down and decided to prepare a preemptive strike that would keep Destiny from ruining my Advisory. When Destiny came to my door the next Friday morning, I asked her, "Are you prepared to participate appropriately today?" She responded, "What do you even *mean*?" and I refused to let her into the room. She spent the next hour with my colleague in an alternate setting, working on an alternate assignment. What I didn't realize at the time was that in that hour Destiny made a decision to turn everything she believed *upside down* and find new ways of being that would enable her to be successful in ways she had never been before.

When she came into my room the following week, before she even sat down, Destiny made a suggestion: “Can we not do “highs” and “lows” this week? Can we just talk about what’s on our minds?” This was her way of holding on to her dignity – that frustrating 13-year-old dignity – but still making enough change to gain entry into the room. This was Destiny turning her thinking *upside down*, and looking at things from a completely new perspective.

“Sure,” I said, “What’s on your mind?”

She said, “I’m thinking of getting my nails done...”

“No.” I said. “Try again.”

“Okayyyy...I’m having a hard time doing the right thing, and I need help to make better choices.”

Those brave words changed my horrendous Advisory Group into the envy of the middle school. Destiny’s courageous decision to open herself to new ways of thinking encouraged others to offer to help her, and made it safe for everyone in the room to set and share their own goals for personal growth. What I didn’t realize until weeks later, was that in Destiny’s world outside school, everything was falling apart.

Things had gotten really bad at mom’s house...Destiny’s older brother moved out...and Destiny felt more alone than she ever had. At the same time, Destiny’s dad was released from prison and wanted to be a part of her life. Even though she hadn’t seen him since she was six years old, and she didn’t really know him at all, Destiny moved into an apartment with her dad in Waterbury.

He drove her to school and picked her up for a while, but then he got a job and couldn’t do that for her. So Destiny adapted to another new routine: she woke up at 5:30 every morning, she got ready for school, and her dad dropped her – alone – at the bus station in downtown Waterbury. From there she caught a bus which left at 6:38 a.m. and arrived in Hartford – alone – at 7:45, more than an hour later. She then transferred to the Hillside Avenue bus and took a fifteen-minute ride to the corner of Flatbush Avenue and Brookfield Street. From there she walked – alone – about a half mile to the school. Every day.

She never missed a day.

About three weeks later, when I realized she had been doing this, I called her to my room to talk to her.

“How’s it going?”

“Good.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve got more ‘stuff’ going on in your life than any 100 people put together. You’re living with a dad you hardly know; you worry every day that he’s going to screw up and get sent back to prison; you’re still having problems with your mom, and you don’t know what high school you’re going to be going to next fall. How can you possibly say it’s going *good*?”

Then Destiny said the words that made me understand her better than I ever had...

“It’s good because it *has* to be good. I have no choice.”

At that moment, I realized that by being in my class and my Advisory this year, Destiny was teaching me more than I would ever be able to teach her.

“It’s good because it *has* to be good. I have no choice.”



Destiny had every reason to give up, to be broken for the rest of her life, and to blame everyone else, but instead she chose to turn her whole way of looking at the world *upside down* from the way she had been doing it. Mom, school, dad, and being vulnerable to other people...

How many *adults* do you know that would get up early enough to be at the bus station by 6:30 every morning to catch a bus – alone – and transfer something to be in homeroom by 8:20 every single day. I’m not sure I would.

How many people do you know that are brave enough to turn everything in their lives *upside down* and come at their problems and uncertainties in ways they’ve never considered before... ways that are *way* outside their comfort zones?



Sometimes we don’t have a choice. Sometimes the whole world turns upside down on us whether or not we have the ability to deal with it, and that’s when we really need to have the ability to find our way in new ways. This is true for us as Christians, and as a faith community. I’d like to close this morning by asking you to consider for a moment the one thing about this church that means the most to you...

Maybe it’s something that was done for you...

Or something you have done...a ministry...a collection...an act of service

Maybe it’s the special friend that keeps you coming here through the tough times...

What’s the one thing here that you can’t imagine doing without?

Now imagine for a moment that it – *the one thing about this church that means the most to you* – is gone, and will never return...and you are never to speak of it or even think about it again.

What if what is left is all you have going forward. Is that enough? Would you be willing to start over here again? To find a new way to belong to this faith community? A new identification for yourself? A new role? A new ministry?



Now take another moment to think again, but this time think about the thing that upsets you most about the time you've spent at this church...

What "that person" did...

What "that minister" said...

What "they" voted for...

The way "he" or "she" did – whatever...

Now imagine for a moment that it – whatever that greatest upset is – is gone, and will never return...and you are never allowed to speak of it or even think about it again.

What if what is left is all you have going forward. Is that enough? Would you be willing to start over here again? To find a new way to belong to this faith community? A new identification for yourself? A new role? A new ministry?



Turmoil in a faith journey is not new. The Protestant church was born of it. The Pilgrims – the very first Congregationalists – left Europe because of it. And this First Congregational Church of Bristol has a long, storied history of turmoil...

- From the vote to call our first minister in 1744 (which took three years and caused 22% of the congregation to immediately leave the church)...
- To the introduction of musical instruments and hymns to the service of worship in the early 1800s (during this time those who didn't like the changes were known to stomp along the aisles to express their displeasure, or even leave when the singing started)...
- To the addition of aluminum siding to the outside walls of our beloved meeting-house in 1979...
- Through the process to become an Open and Affirming church just a handful of years ago.



Are we brave enough to look at Kathy's resignation again, *upside-down*? Are we open-minded enough to examine the building renovation the same way? Are we courageous enough to approach every issue that arises ***carefully, respectfully, and lovingly***? Can we do so without simply looking for arguments that support how we already feel? Can we be *upside-down* enough to be open to the notion that what we've always believed may be wrong? Are we strong enough to try something new?

Destiny was that strong. Destiny was that brave. Destiny was that courageous, and it made all the difference for her.

Which destiny will you choose?

I pray that we will all choose to create our destiny as well as Destiny chose to create hers, so that things will be good not because they have to be, but because we are aware of the amazing grace and unconditional love that God has for all of us, and the work we are being called to do together in God's name.

Amen.