

March 6, 2016

“Streams of Mercy: Depth of Mercy”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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 he told them this parable:

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.’”

This morning, for the fourth year in a row, First United Methodist Church is officially worshipping in two places. While many of us are here in the sanctuary as per usual, a great bunch of us is up on San Vicente Blvd. participating in the Home Run for Kids to benefit Upward Bound House.

Some 30 or so from our congregation are participating. Pastor Robert served communion to our First UMC congregation and any others who wanted to join in at 8 am before people set out.

So we’re worshipping in two places, but I will say to you also that in my heart, I’m worshipping in three. Last Sunday, I was worshipping and sharing Holy Communion with United Methodists in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, where God’s streams of mercy had carried me in preparation for our United Methodist General Conference in May. Those brothers and sisters are very much on my mind and in my heart this morning, and I look forward in a couple weeks to sharing that experience with you in more depth.

As our Streams of Mercy Lenten series continues, we hear this morning another of Jesus’ parables of mercy, the story we call “The Prodigal Son” or as one preacher friend calls it: “The Story of the Dysfunctional Family!”

Jesus the preacher has an interesting congregation for this one who can easily be seen as represented by characters in the story. Evidently, the tax collectors and the sinners were there, listening. That is, the ones who had been told they were bad and unworthy, those who probably felt they were on some level, so bad as to not even belong there listening. And there, too, were the self-righteous religious types who were probably quite convinced that they were not sinners at all, that they were right with God and God with them, and, in fact, they were trying to say that those other undesirables really had no place in the pews.

I wonder whose faces would look eager to hear the message...I wonder who might be weeping.

You know, like any regular congregation, we’re all mixed together, aren’t we, the sinners and the righteous? You can’t really tell by looking. Haven’t we all found ourselves at different times on both sides of the line? And so they came that day, you see, all of them, to listen to Jesus, in search of healing, all of them hoping to hear a word of forgiveness, a life-giving word of mercy and hope, even for them.

And so Jesus told this congregation of sinners and righteous a story about a man who had two sons, one of each, the sinner and the righteous, but a story in which, after a while, it was hard to tell which was which, and the father seems to understand that there’s room enough for both in that home, and that there would be feasting enough for them all.

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one asked for his share of the inheritance before his father even died. His father, who might have said “No” said instead “OK” and gave him the money. Now for some reason we’re not told, this younger son felt a need to go faraway from that father and that home and that older brother and from everybody he knew and who knew him. Was he just a wild kid? Or was his home situation intolerable, for reasons we are not told?

For whatever reason, the younger son ran as fast and as far as he could. Until the money ran out, what a great time he had, ‘dissolute living’, the text says, ‘a life of debauchery’, says another translation, another called it ‘riotous living’.

But when he was finally broke and a famine came over the land, he began to starve along with everyone else. He hired himself out in the lowest of jobs, feeding pigs, and when he was hungry enough to realize that he wanted to eat the same pods the pigs were eating,

the text says: 'he came to himself'. It's what AA and other 12-step groups call "hitting bottom". It could get no worse, and he faced the choice between the business of dying and the business of living. And in that moment, "he came to himself."

The words mean that he remembered his true self. That is, he repented meaning, he turned around, he literally "changed his mind" and put on a new one, which was actually his old one, as he remembered who he was. His father's son. He was still his father's son.

And in remembering, he could return to the father he had taken for granted and hurt so deeply, not expecting much more than the food provided to his father's servants.

Ah, but how much more awaits him! Perhaps, during his son's painful absence, the father had also realized some things about himself. Now, sensing his son's return, he runs out while his son is still far off, runs out to greet him, to embrace and kiss him. His father is filled with mercy and joy. Dwelling not on the past, his father celebrates his homecoming with robe, sandals, ring, and feast, exclaiming: "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found!"

This is the only parable, the only time in the Scripture, actually, when Jesus uses the word for "resurrection"--"and is alive again." We have here the movement from death to life, a movement so mysterious to us when we place it solely in the context of physical death, but so compelling for us when we place it in the context of relationships restored, of bitterness put aside, of sin forgiven, of coming to our senses and starting over. This is the medicine of mercy! The one who was dead is alive to his true self, and alive again to his father, and they feast together. This is resurrection!

We might stop there, but the story goes on so that the whole congregation is embraced, not just the sinners, you see, but the righteous as well, in the person of the older brother.

Bitter, jealous, angry, spiteful--he adds the line about his younger brother being with prostitutes! "I've been here all along", he whines. "I've been good. I've never disobeyed you. I've worked as hard as your slaves--and you never gave a feast for me!"

He's so angry that, if you look closely at the text, you'll notice that he does not even call his father "Father". HE breaks the relationship now, out of bitterness and his sense of entitlement. The older son becomes the prodigal. He leaves his father emotionally, distancing himself and denying his father's love. We are left to wonder if this son will ever "come to himself" and turn around.

The father has mercy on him as well. He embraces this, his angry and jealous son, too. "You are with me always," he says. "All I have is yours."

The father insists on relationship with both and he reminds them both that they are still "brother" to one another. The father does the hard work of mercy, reconciliation working to create salvation--wholeness, healing, restoration of relationship and covenant, out of brokenness and acrimony and pain. Mercy is a force that overcomes everything (Pope Francis.)

Now, over the years, some of you have told me that you don't like this parable because it's not fair. And you know what? You're right. It's not fair, thank God. God's mercy isn't "fair" at all. God's mercy is not measured in human categories. God's mercy reaches out to embrace the broken-hearted father of a broken family. God's mercy reaches out to embrace the selfish, reckless, self-destructive younger son. God's mercy reaches out to embrace the selfish, self-centered, condescending older son as well. Not fair at all. None of them was particularly entitled to mercy by their actions. God is merciful anyway. God loves them anyway.

This is a story of our God whose name is mercy. Whether we're like the older son or the younger son, or whether we're more like the father who didn't know how things had gone so wrong, whether our relationships feel good and healthy or are in need of restoration and reconciliation....wherever we are today, there is mercy for us, for all of us, for the whole of who each of us is, in the embrace of God's love. The mercy of God is deep and wide and broad and deep enough for us all, and for all of who we are.

The invitation this morning to each of us is to receive this love, this healing love. Receive it and let it heal the hurts in our hearts. Receive it and let it reconcile us to those we have cast aside and those from whom we are estranged. Receive it and let it become incarnate, real, in all of our actions, our words, in the mercy we extend to all.

As our walkers are concluding their walk this morning, a work of mercy to support the families, the children, of Upward Bound House, let me conclude this homily with these words based on a prayer from the 16th century Spanish teacher and mystic, Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the mercy of Christ must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which Christ blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes-- you are his body."

Let us prepare our hearts to come now to the table—set here, and up on San Vicente, and in Haiti, and half-way around the world in West Africa—come to the mercy seat. Come to the feast of love. Let us be one with Christ. One with each other. And one in ministry to all the world.