

John Sampson
"Back from the Dead"
Text: Luke 15:1 – 3, 11b - 32
Preached at KVCC
March 31, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

This week we continue our Lenten journey with Jesus, towards Jerusalem, towards the end of his ministry, and the end of his life.

But as a people of hope we believe that death and the cross are not going to be the end of our story. That it will continue into new and unexpected life.

And so this morning I don't believe it's any coincidence that our tradition has us read a story that contains the refrain: and they celebrated because he was dead, and now he was alive.

I think our spiritual ancestors want to get us ready to imagine what the meaning of Easter could be for us before it happens. They want us to begin to wrestle with the possibility of resurrection in our own lives, before we ever hear the story of Jesus being resurrected.

And so today we hear this story, which is often called the story of the prodigal son, and we find that resurrection maybe isn't always a supernatural event. Maybe resurrection describes something that could happen in our own ordinary and dysfunctional lives. Maybe resurrection could happen right in the messiness of something like a rivalry with our siblings.

When I read this story over and over again to prepare for this morning, a phrase kept popping up out of the text, kept grabbing my attention.

It's a phrase that the father says to his older son, who refuses to enter and celebrate the return of the younger son, of his brother.

The father says to him, "all that I have is yours."

"All that I have is yours."

All the love I have is yours.

All the forgiveness that lives in my heart is yours.

All of my possessions are yours.

All of my strength and power are yours.

All I have is yours my faithful son.

Our tradition records this story, this parable of Jesus, and offers it us as our spiritual inheritance because they believe it reveals something about how God works in our world, and in our life.

Perhaps in this story the father is a symbolic representation of God. Through his unquestioning generosity to his younger son, through his open-armed welcome at the return of his son after he has wasted his inheritance, through his never keeping accounts and blessing his son with a welcome home feast, we are given an image, an icon of God that shows us this parable shouldn't be called the parable of the prodigal son. It should be called the parable of the prodigal God. A God who loves and accepts us and welcomes us back no matter how many times we fall away, no matter how many times we forget our true home. God is always standing and waiting at the end of her driveway ready to welcome us back, no questions asked.

All that I have is yours says God to us.

This statement seems like a headline, proclaiming an exuberant love, a message of unbelievable hope, and yet in this story it also seems like the most challenging fine print.

Because although God welcomes us back with open arms, she doesn't come alone. God's got a lot of children who are coming with her.

It's almost like a biblical version of Cheaper by the Dozen, or the Brady Bunch. Sure falling in love with God is wonderful. Who wouldn't be smitten with such generosity and loving kindness. But then there are all those kids, and in the sitcoms and comedies about blended families everything works out just fine. But in our lives we may know a different truth.

It's not always as easy to love the children that come with a new spouse, or who are now your new brothers and sisters. Especially when they have what we consider to be lots of bad habits, and obnoxious behaviors, and moral failings, and have no interest in changing their ways. This is a situation that can really give us a run for our money.

And you see it in our story.

After the younger brother wastes his entire inheritance on, as the story says "dissolute living," he returns and certainly admits what he has done to his father. But he never repents. He never says I'm sorry. I'm going to change my ways. And this doesn't bother the father at all. He still loves his son unconditionally.

But for the brother who has stayed behind and worked and tried to be a good son to see his father accept his younger brother back without any conditions is just too galling. It's so galling that he can't even recognize his relationship to his brother. Instead of calling him "my brother" when he speaks to his father, he calls him "your son."

Who are the children of God who are dead to you?

Are they the children who voted in a different way than you did? Are they the children who have a different idea of how to address the immigrant crisis in our country?

Who are the children of God who you can't even admit sharing a common humanity with?

Are they the ones who live in a prison cell, or the ones who believe something different than you do about climate change?

Who are your brothers and sisters in spirit who you resent because they haven't repented, because they haven't lived as you think they should?

Are they the ones who are the addicts, or who need help supporting their children through social services, or who aren't interested in giving up their Dinty Moore Stew in favor of fresh organic greens?

All that is mine is yours. Even these.

You see I think it is easy for us to love our God of infinite generosity, and love as long as she comes by herself. It's a totally different story when she comes with all of her children who don't live like we think they should.

And this is where death enters our story.

Because I think sometimes we'd like to accept only half of God's proposal. I think sometimes we'd like to tell God that she can give us the grace and the eternal, and hold on to her other children.

And if she won't do it then we will.

Think of a person, or a group of people, who you really find difficult to deal with. Who you really don't like.

These are the people who we subtly and psychologically, and politically, and morally and economically push away from ourselves. These are the people we separate from ourselves. These are the people who we hope will become invisible. These are the people who become dead to us.

Someone told me that there are no drug addicts here in Keene Valley. There are definitely some in Elizabethtown, but not in this town.

I didn't go to see my Uncle Bill because he's always telling me climate change is a hoax.

A member of this church told me she wouldn't be coming to this church anymore because us liberals aren't informed and don't know what we're talking about.

These are just a few of the ways we deaden another person to ourselves. We alienate them; we silence them; we remove them from our lives. They become dead to us. And in the process we deaden ourselves. We paralyze ourselves like the older brother of our parable so that we can't meet our brothers and sisters. We paralyze ourselves with our own sense of being right so that we can't welcome each other in our shared humanity. We have killed the other, and we have killed ourselves in our own rigidity and sense of privilege.

But I know, because you have all told me, that we are praying for a resurrection.

We are praying that the divides that separate us and make us dead to one another will come crashing down.

We are praying that we can come together as a people once again with a vision of shared purpose.

That we can overcome our political and social rivalries to live as children of God, as brother and sister once again.

I know many here don't believe in the empirical and bodily resurrection of Jesus. But I know many of you who disbelieve the literal truth of this central moment of our faith story, absolutely do hope for the resurrection of us as a people and as neighbors.

Our parable never tells us what ultimately happens between the two brothers and their father. We never see if the brothers are ultimately reconciled. We never know if the father dies having lived the final years of his life shuttling between brothers who will never speak to each other.

I think it is for us to imagine how this story ends, and then to write it not in words, and not in a book, but in our hearts, and in our actions, in our lives, and across our nation.

But as we write together the ending of our story remember:

All that is mine is yours.

Amen.