Sermon 3: Luke 15:1-3. 11b-32 Lawrence Civale

There are few better-- known stories in Scripture than the Return of Prodigal Son. Most of us know the story fairly well. Music, poetry and art have all attempted to capture what happens between a loving father and his two sons. One of the most famous depictions is by the 17th c Dutch painter, Rembrandt. If you look at the cover of your bulletin, you can see the painting. A father seems to be lovingly blessing his younger son while his older son looks on from the side. I think the painting is a bit haunting as it pulls us in and I find myself identifying with the three in different ways and on different levels. Henri Nouwen, the 20th c spiritual writer, wrote a whole meditative essay on the painting and the parable itself. Nouwen had spent much of his life struggling to understand how to live a life pleasing to God. He wrote: “Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. …The question is not ‘How am I to love God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be loved by God?'” Beautiful words of hope that seem to capture what our parable is about on this mid-Lenten morning.

As he often does, Jesus tells the parable to get our attention. In this case he shares the story just as he sits down with a group of sinful tax collectors and with the Pharisees disapprovingly looking on. Jesus tells us that two sons have been working on their father’s estate. The younger son becomes restless and wants to leave the home, something understandable in our day, but not as much in first century Palestine. The son not only requests to leave, but also requests that his father give him his share of his inheritance. To make it worse the son wants to sell the inheritance--family land, for hard cash. There is a deep sense of selfishness in his request, because he’s asking his father for what *he* believes he is owed. He not only wants to leave, but seems to believe he is entitled to leave and take the land that will be his in future and to cash it in as if it’s not good enough in itself. For the Palestinians, the value of an estate was wrapped up in the value of the land that one held. And the father seems to have an abundance of it. But this is not good enough for the younger son, he wants what he wants and he takes advantage of his father’s generous unquestioning love in order to get it. There is no sense that he cares about how his actions and choices affect others. The father gives what his son requests. The son sells the land, and takes the proceeds and squanders it on wasteful living. His selfish behavior and choices are opposite of his father, who gives and loves his son without question.

Eventually, the son runs out of money. He’s starving and alone. He is so desperate that he has to take a job that is at the lowest level for a Jew, as it requires that he work side by side with pigs. He is along way from what he dreamt about and a long way from his father’s hopes for him. He begins to feel remorse in his decisions and I would imagine he felt great shame. Eventually he comes to his senses and remembers that his father’s hired hands have lived better than he is living. He remembers that he can trust his father and decides to return home to confess his sin.

As the father sees his son coming up the road it’s as if knows what his son is experiencing and he does something uncharacteristic for a man of his stature and position in society. He is so overjoyed that he run’s out to meet him. Imagine the scene. Here was an old patriarch who didn’t need to run for anyone. People would have been expected to come to him out of respect and obedience. But the father doesn’t only run to his son, he embraces him, gives him shoes and puts a ring on his finger, which shows his deep desire to be in union with him. This restores him to dignity. The son doesn’t even have a chance to confess his wrong- doing! The father seems to cuts him off and states that there would be a celebration for him, welcoming him back, not only into the household, but into the entire community. He wants everyone to know how important his son is and that he is forgiven. For the son it’s as if he has returned from his own self –inflicted exile. But now he is reunited with his father and community. The father’s only desire is to celebrate that his *son was lost but now he is found.*

In the meantime there is the older brother. He is living through his own exile. He has remained physically close to the father doing what is expected. But he is very distant from him in spiritual and emotional ways. When he hears that his brother is back, his reaction is the opposite of his fathers. He sees how his brother has been received and he becomes resentful, maybe even threatened. He finds his father’s forgiveness and generosity incomprehensible. Without hesitation the father goes to him and listens to him. But the older son refuses to go the banquet and states that he has been obedient and worked hard for him, slaved for him and has received very little in return. His younger brother had devoured the family land for prostitutes, while he remained and did what was expected. His words are interesting here. He states that he has slaved for his father and obeyed all of his commands. When I hear I this story the father doesn’t seem to demand that anyone slave for him. The son seems to miss the deeper, more important thing- that his father has given him the most important thing- his unconditional love. The son doesn’t get it. He can neither receive his love, nor give it back. Again the father tries to convince him to attend the celebration. He almost pleads with him*: Son you have always been with me and all that is mine is yours, this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.*

So as we see the most important part of this story is not what either of the sons are doing, it’s what the father does. His abundant love for both of his children is unconditional. He just loves, forgives and accepts. The father’s love is always there and keeps coming no matter what choices the sons make. The father never gives up on either of his children and does what is necessary. He meets them where they are. He runs to them. This is grace! God’s grace is like this! St Paul reminds us in today’s epistle, that in Christ’s death and resurrection, “God has reconciled the world to himself, not counting our trespasses, or our debts but entrusting the message of his reconciliation to us. That reconciliation can only come through Christ’s death and resurrection.” The world cannot have reconciliation and peace without this ultimate, supreme and divine act of love. God’s grace flows from this. His love and forgiveness flow from this. All he wants for us is that we are reconciled to him. This action on God’s part is totally God’s, regardless of what we do! Everything that God has is given to us, God’s whole being is for giving and for loving. We might fall away from him, but his grace will never stop coming. All God wants is for us to find our fulfillment and life *in him*. So as we turn the corner and move closer to Easter, let’s do what it takes to soften our hearts, to open our hearts and to let God more fully into our lives.