

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

We've just heard a story from Jesus that is the very heart of the gospel. It's familiar to almost everybody. And it's such a reassuring picture of God...forgiving, expansive, extravagant and loving. How could any of us resist? But as glorious as this picture of God is, if we look closely at this story we can see that it is multilayered. There are lots of stories here and they all focus on one thing...relationship and what it means to be in relationship with God and with each other. The word that comes to mind in thinking of all three of the characters in this story is 'homesick'! Each of them is homesick in his own way. Most of us have been homesick at one time or another. We long for the familiar. We long for a sense of safety. We search for a situation that is predictable...and most of all for the relationships that make us feel 'at home.' When we are in a strange situation or are unhappy about our life, we all know how great it feels when that absolutely right person for us walks into the room. We aren't homesick any more and all's right with the world. Those relationships make us feel connected and included. And they give us a sense of belonging. It's the relationship itself that makes us feel 'at home.'

Now the allegory of this story is obvious. The local Pharisees have just criticized Jesus for spending time with sinners. Immediately Jesus launches into the story about the prodigal son...the sinner. The two sons are factions in the community. The older son represents the law abiders...the ones who keep the law and are proud of it, but have no sense of God actually being connected to them...or they to him. The younger son is portrayed by the sinners; the ones who have willfully walked away from God and cultural tradition. Perhaps Jesus wants us to see that there's a little bit of Pharisee in all of us and there's a little bit of the prodigal in us, too.

But this is not a morality tale. It's a beautiful open-ended story that Jesus uses to teach us about the nature of God. He leaves the story open-ended enough to be thought-provoking. Jesus wants us to think! Jesus talks about a man who had two sons. We're very familiar with the younger son...the prodigal. The story is named for him. But perhaps Jesus wants us to take a look at both the sons. Who do we identify with in this story? The dad? The willful son? The obedient but emotionally distant son? Who are we in this story? And how does this story end? Does the younger son mend his ways never to be disobedient and willful again? Does the older brother let go of his resentment and reconcile with his young brother? Does he finally decide to go into the house to enjoy the feast with his brother and the whole community? Does he finally connect and the Dad and form a real relationship with him? Does the father end up regretting how foolishly he has taken back his sinful younger son? These are all questions that Jesus wants

us to think about. At one time or another, each one of us could probably identify with each one of these characters.

The relationships between these three have been broken...just as our relationship with God and with each other is often broken. Each of them is homesick for relationships that work. Each of them longs for reconciliation. The father is homesick for his younger son who has disappeared. And the father is also homesick for his older son...the one who stayed at home and did everything he was supposed to do, but apparently didn't feel 'at home' with his own father. And the younger son was homesick for the safety of the home and family that he had so thoughtlessly abandoned. All three of them were hurting. The father wants both his sons to be with him, but the older one refuses to come inside. He is full of resentment. He is outraged by all that his younger brother has done and he's angry that his father has embraced this younger son so completely without holding him accountable for all that he's done wrong. And he has every right to feel that way. Can't we all relate to that?

And this father has every reason to be broken-hearted over all the things his younger son has said and done. The younger son all but said he wished his father were dead when he asked for his inheritance early. He abandons the family and in order to get the cash he needs he probably sold part of the family land...something sacred to any Palestinian family. He walks away without a word or a bit of concern for the welfare of his family and he adopts a lifestyle that is deeply offensive to them...and one that fails him. This father has every reason in the world to feel hurt and insulted about the way he had been treated. He has every reason in the world to be outraged at all the sinful things his son has done. No one would have blamed him if he had slammed the door in his son's face when he returned. He had every right to do just that! But he didn't.

The father is the one who shows us what true forgiveness and reconciliation looks like.

And how often do we have every right to react the way we do to someone else's insults, someone else's bad behavior, or someone else's thoughtlessness? A mean word here...a thoughtless action there. Our reactions are normal emotional reactions to insult and bad behavior and thoughtlessness. We have every right to be resentful. We have every right to be outraged. We have every right to be angry. We have every right to have hurt feelings. And we have every right to turn our backs or slam the door. We know what this feels like.

But being 'right' isn't all there is to it.

What did the father in this story have to do in order to reconcile with his son? It appears he wants his son...a relationship with his son...more than he wants to prove his points about being right. That's the key. The relationship is more important than anything else. He puts aside and lets go of all his own negative emotions. He gives up his outrage. He abandons his notion of making his son pay for his awful actions. He empties out his bag of grudges that he had been filling up the whole time his son has been gone.

For his part, the younger son gives up all the self-recriminations, all the disgust with himself, all the regret that he feels and the overwhelming shame he carries with him. That's not easy to do. Sometimes, even being forgiven is painful! Getting the mercy we don't deserve is humbling. Being on the receiving end of graces changes us.

The older son does not reconcile with his father or his brother. He won't give up the feelings he has to give up in order to feel 'at home' with both his brother and his father. He can't let go of his resentment. He refuses to abandon his own anger and outrage at the unfairness of it all. He won't release his own hurt and disappointment in not being the favored son. He has every right to these feelings. We can all relate to how he feels and the unfairness of it all. He's been such a dutiful son and, yet, duty doesn't build relationship. There is nothing wrong with the way he feels, but he can't set it all aside. He stays outside. He won't go to the feast with his brother and the others. The father is homesick for the son who left; and he's homesick for the one who stayed as well. There's a difference between being dutiful and being well-connected.

Homesick. All three are homesick.

God calls us home to himself. And there is a part of us that is homesick for God. St. Augustine said it best when he said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." There is a little piece of every human being that searches for something that is missing. We human beings try lots and lots of things to fill that missing spot until we find that searching for and finding God is the only satisfying thing that provides us with a sense of well-being...a sense of having come home.

And when we turn toward God, God foolishly runs out to meet us. God does not bombard us with recriminations. God rejoices when we show up. God lavishes us with everything our souls need. God's love is not conditional on whether or not we get it right all the time. In this season of Lent when we are doing daily self-examinations it's easy for us to lose sight of the strength and power of God's love. And yet the season of Lent is our time to move toward God anyway. It is precious time set aside for us to strengthen our relationship with God...to have God more in focus, to talk with God more often, to read about God more frequently, to listen to God with open hearts and open ears and to acknowledge our dependence on God in every way we can. Our ability to feel God's love is bound up in our willingness to set aside our own sense of unworthiness and seek and embrace God with the same passion he has for us. And its bound up in our letting go of our hurts and our resentments, our envy and our outrage. That's when we stop being homesick. That's when we begin to feel truly 'at home' in our own skin. That is when we truly come home to the God who loves us...no strings attached.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.