

The goal in my sermon this morning is simply to understand a little better ourselves and our relationship to God. Part of that relationship involves us going astray some times. Where does that come from? Augustine said that faith seeks understanding....and so do we. Sometimes, as a friend pointed out to me, understanding seeks faith! That may be true for you as well.

Today we heard Jesus tell one of our most familiar and beloved parables. It is called the parable of the Prodigal Son. Maybe this is so because most of the story seems to be about the adventures of a younger son. But it perhaps should be called the parable of the loving father. Because it is from the actions of the loving father than we are to learn and benefit.

A perfect father, loving home, imperfect sons. Chances are, if you can't identify with one of the characters the story, you can identify with the other. What makes this a truly great parable is that it works on two levels. Jesus originally told this story as we hear in the beginning, to the people who were gathered. There were tax collectors and sinners who were listening intently to what Jesus said. And there were Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling that Jesus kept bad company. The younger son in the story stands for the tax collectors and sinners. They stand for the Gentiles as a whole. They have sinned. They know they have done wrong. But they become willing to change their lives, and they can hear the words of Jesus as Good News.

The older son is the Pharisees and the scribes. They in turn stand for all the Jewish people. God's beloved older children have diligently followed the law all their lives. This story shows that they have a problem with the idea that God might be the God of all people, even those tax collectors and sinners? The generosity of the loving Father is too much to bear. It makes them angry.

Now we can look at the parable on a personal level. We can see ourselves as the younger son, the older son, or maybe the loving parent. But how upsetting for a parent to have his child want to take all his money and run. How impossible it would be for most of us to hand over the cash, and stand aside and watch our child ruin his life.

But that's what the boy needed. That's what we all need and are given – free will . That father did what most of us could probably not do – give him free reign to make of his life what he will. The father gave him free will to make whatever decision he wanted to make.

Those of us in the congregation who see in ourselves the younger son's story, who have found ourselves going down a path we really shouldn't have been on, full of pride and selfishness, know what it feels like when we finally "come to ourselves" . Just like our prodigal guy, we have had to find the humility to admit that our lives had become a mess. It takes some gumption to be able to say, I really screwed up, and I know I'm going to have to suffer the consequences, but it is still better to be slopping the pigs in my Father's house, than to be starving to death far away from home.

Or, we might feel we have more in common with the older son who tries his best to be a good person, doing what she is told, and perhaps feeling ignored as the dependable one. But the way that the loving Father welcomes the prodigal back is just too much to bear. Envy, jealousy, pride and fear all rear their ugly heads. Pride says you don't need to acknowledge this brother. He's forfeited his right to be part of the family. He ditched after all. The older son will not even acknowledge that the other is his brother. The Pharisees too would not acknowledge that the Gentiles were their brothers and sister. It seems as though they still don't.

Where does all this come from? The sins of the two sons, as different as they are, where do they arise from to begin with? You can't say that it's the father's fault. This father is the ideal. Did the prodigal fall in with a bad crowd who influenced him? Did the good son hear whispers

from mom that he wasn't good enough all through his childhood? We aren't told those sorts of details. But we want to know more.

Where does this tendency we have to do the wrong thing at times come from? Is it nature or nurture? In college I was a student of philosophy. I reveled in those topics that had no clear resolution. I liked arguing each point of view as best I could and then see where the chips fall. So, this matter of trying to see where our human failings come from interests me.

Those of you who have had a religious upbringing have probably learned that our sinfulness comes from the time of Adam and Eve. They made the wrong choice. We make the wrong choices too because of Original Sin, we were taught. Eve ate of the fruit of that tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and we've been saddled with it ever since. Augustine gave us the term Original Sin, but it's been there all through time.

Those of you who have had a more humanist upbringing, or have always felt that the idea of OS is too harsh, will argue that humans were made in our Father's image. We are good at our core because "God don't make no junk." Both sides of this argument have become very heated over the centuries. Who is right? Can the parable of the prodigal help us out here? Can we ever get back to Eden and the original relationship we had with our Creator?

Our very brief story from the book of Joshua tells of the hopes of the Israelites to do just that. Their hope was that after years of wandering in the wilderness, years of suffering at the hands of the Egyptians, that now, finally, they had come to the land that God had promised them. This was to be their new Eden, with good soil to grow crops – a place to settle down finally and grow that Garden. God gave them this land. The only problem was that there were people already settled in this land who did not want to give up their homeland to the newcomers. This passage comes in chap 5 of Joshua the rest of the 24 chapters of this book are mostly about the battles that the Israelites waged against the various towns and cities and peoples that came against them. It doesn't sound much like Eden to me.

Our ancestors had a similar experience. When the Puritans set sail for the new World (by the way, the word Puritan was considered to be a pejorative label. They called themselves The Godly). But we know from their writings that they had high hopes for the settlement of the new World. They too, like the Israelites and many other explorers before them, thought that if they could just escape the sin and corruption of the old world, England and Europe, and have a chance with a clean slate and knowledge of God's will that they would have a new and wonderfully good world. People would love each other because they have no reason not to. Socrates said, "To know the good is to do the Good." That's a hopeful statement. But I'm not sure if we really can live up to it. We know now that the new world has turned out in most ways just like the old world. There is good and there is evil on both sides of the pond.

So, if we really try hard, can't we get back to our better selves, the goodness that is at the core of us? Saint Paul didn't think so. He says, "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*" **Romans 7:15** Paul does not think that we can always do the good, no matter how well we know what the good is.

Calvin and his peers would have us believe that we are beings of total depravity. We are unable to even lift our heads out of the mire, except for the goodness of God in sending his son, Jesus to us.

Isn't it possible that we are both? We are good at our very core, because we are made in the image of God and we are good people much of the time, but that we also are not God. We are imperfect and so don't always make the right choices 100% of the time. Whether we are born with sin, or acquire it along the way may be difficult to determine. But the one thing you can say for the acknowledgement of OS is that at least it puts us all on a level playing field. Unlike our older brother in the parable, who won't acknowledge his brother because he follows God's laws, if we see that we all have faults, then we are all brothers and sisters. We have no grounds on which to say that we are better than someone else, or that God loves them more.

This debate has raged on forever, but one humorous turn came in the 18th century in England when the evangelical preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley was gaining popularity among the people. The Dutchess of Buckingham was not thrilled with George Whitefield's preaching about OS. She writes to George, "...The doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tintured with impertinence and disrespect towards their Superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting." * Well, the good lady sounds a little like the older son to me.

What is there to be learned from all this? That God is Good. All the time. It is God who is all generous, to common wretches and to the highborn dukes and duchesses.

We can only pray that God will help us "come to ourselves" as quickly as possible, so that we can set off and go to our Father.

That table there where we come Sunday by Sunday is where we will be fed, and strengthened and given the grace to see more clearly and more honestly. To forgive someone even when we might feel they don't deserve it. And to ask for forgiveness even if we don't feel we are in the wrong; to acknowledge our brother and sister. The grace that we receive in the bread and wine of Holy Communion reminds us as Paul tells us in our reading today, that we are in Christ by virtue of our baptism and our participation in the HC. We are given the authority and the responsibility to reconcile and to be reconciled. To do so we will have to be generous like the father in the parable. No matter if we have our faith and our understanding, if we have it all figured out or not. It doesn't matter. What is important is that we let Christ work through us and do the job our Father has given us to do; to love, to reconcile and to forgive.

* Quoted from *Original Sin* by Allan Jacobs. HarperCollins. 2009