

## **The Fourth Sunday of Lent March 27, 2022**

When Deacon Bill was first assigned to his new parish, a group of young people approached him and asked if he would start a Bible study for them. He was delighted by their enthusiasm and eagerly agreed to meet with them every week to study the Scriptures.

For their first meeting together, Bill decided he would begin by talking about the Parable of the Prodigal Son. He figured that it would be a good place to start since we can understand all of Scripture through the lens of God's great love and mercy for us.

When he sat down with the young people and began reading the text with them, he expected that they would want to talk about the prodigal son and the experience he had of returning home and being forgiven by his father. But, the young people wanted to talk about the older son. They said they could understand why the older son was so upset and why he didn't want to join the party for his brother.

It occurred to Deacon Bill that these were all good kids who hadn't yet had the experience of going the wrong way in life. So he simply told them, "Just know that whenever you mess up - no matter how bad it is - you can always come home to your Father and know you'll be forgiven."

Like the young people in the Bible study, many of us might be sympathetic to the older brother. Like him, we may have done the right thing most of our lives. We want to live in a world where goodness is rewarded and evil is punished. We don't want to see people who have sinned be easily forgiven and let off the hook. But the world isn't always like that. Bad things happen to good people. And sometimes it seems as though bad people get away with doing evil. There might even be times when we're tempted to wonder if doing the right thing is even worth it.

Our God is a God of justice. It matters to Him whether we are doing the right thing or not. But He is not quick to punish. Instead, He is merciful and quick to forgive. He wants to give people the chance to repent of their sinfulness and turn back to Him.

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If He were to punish us severely every time we disobeyed Him, we might tow the line but we would never learn about His love for us. And we would never have the courage to turn back to Him when we sinned.

If we, like the young people in the Bible study, identify more with the older brother than the younger one, then today's parable is for us. St Luke tells us as much. When the Pharisees and scribes complain about how friendly Jesus is with sinners, the gospel tells us that it is "to them [that] Jesus addressed this parable." Let's take a moment, then, to look at the older brother and see what his actions might reveal to us about our own hearts.

The older brother had no idea how great his father's love for him was. He thought that, because he worked so hard and never disobeyed, that he could earn his father's approval and love. But the truth was that he had that love already. The father tells him as much when he says, "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours." The father loved his sons not because they were hard working and obedient but simply because they were his sons.

Some of us may believe that we have to earn God's love. We believe that, if we are good, God will somehow love us more. But, like the father in the parable, God loves us simply because we are His beloved sons and daughters. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less.

Because the older son was so busy keeping score of all the good he had done and all the evil his younger brother had done, he could not be happy that his younger brother was home safe and sound. Rather, he wanted to see his brother be punished and to suffer for abandoning the family. The older brother had no love in his heart for his younger brother.

The same can be true for us. When we want to see people who have hurt us or others suffer, it is because we have lost our love for them. We have let our pain and

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hurt harden our hearts. It is understandable when that happens just as it is understandable that the older brother would be resentful of his younger brother. But we cannot let bitterness and resentment take root in our hearts. Rather, we are called to be people of mercy. Like the father in the parable, we are called to reach out to sinners not push them away. We are called to embrace them not wish them harm.

Finally, though the older son spent a lot of time working alongside his father, he never became like his father. Though his father was kind, he had become judgmental. Though his father was forgiving, he had become resentful. The older brother never physically left his father's side, but his heart was far from him.

We are like the older son when we do good things but don't become good people. If we are physically in church every Sunday, but our hearts are not softening and becoming loving, then we are actually very far away from our Heavenly Father who is love itself. If all our Lenten practices are making us prouder and more judgmental, then we are missing the point. And, like the older brother, there will come a time when all that bitterness and resentment that we have been harboring will spill out and hurt someone.

Deacon Bill got one thing right - the love of God is the key to understanding the Bible and the Christian life. It is a love that we do not have to earn. It is a love that welcomes us home no matter what we have done. It is a love that celebrates when we do come home. This man, Jesus, welcomes sinners and eats with them. He welcomes those who have been judgmental alongside those who have been adulterers. He welcomes those who have been proud alongside those who have stolen. If we realize that we are sinners and confess that we do not want to sin again, then we are welcome here. Confident in God's great love for us, then we can also welcome and celebrate together with all the fellow sinners around us who are our brothers and sisters.