

Lent 4C [1686] St. Barnabas Episcopal Church March 14, 2010 {1514R} Bay City, Michigan

**TEXT: Luke 15:11-32**

One of my fondest memories of being your priest more than twenty years ago was the night a large group of us went to a local dinner theater to see *Godspell*. John Michael Tebelek, Carnegie Tech student and Episcopalian, wrote the whimsical musical based on the gospels after experiencing a less than enthusiastic Easter service at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Pittsburgh. "Instead of...resurrecting the Christ," he said, "it seems those people had pushed Him back into the tomb. They had refused to let him come out that day." <sup>1</sup>

I have seen *Godspell* many times since that outing, but none of the other productions did a funnier or better job of revealing Jesus' intent when he told this story of the two brothers and their forgiving father. The actors played the first part of the story the way you would expect, having fun with the depths to which the prodigal had fallen after he left home. The portrayal of his return to receive his father's forgiveness was touching and funny at the same time. But the kicker came when the son who stayed home confronted his father over the banquet given in the prodigal's honor. The actor playing him threw a hissy fit—a real temper tantrum worthy of any two year old child. He jumped up and down stomping his feet, fell on the floor and pounded his fists and kicked his feet on the ground, screaming that his daddy was not fair. The audience roared with laughter, and I came to realize that Jesus told this tale as a joke on the Pharisees who were watching from the sidelines.

If you go back to the beginning of the chapter, Luke says, "By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased.... They growled, 'He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.'" <sup>2</sup> This production of *Godspell* made it clear that Jesus responded to the Pharisees grumblings by satirizing their attitudes in the reaction of the older son.

I can almost see Jesus wink at his sympathetic listeners and give a knowing nod toward the Pharisees when he comes to the appearance of the son who didn't leave home. With a wry smile, Jesus says "The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son [whined], 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up, and you go all out with a feast!'" I'm almost certain Jesus' listeners laughed at this satirical description. They knew he was talking about the Pharisees.

The reason why they laughed is that the older, "good" son was *too religious*, just like the Pharisees were. The Pharisee knew what the religious rules were, and they scrupulously observed them. They knew backwards and forwards the doctrines they were supposed to believe, and they believed them with all their hearts. They thought God owed them a reward because they had been so religious in their conduct and beliefs. So it came as a giant shock to them when the father in this story killed the fatted calf and put on a lavish banquet for the kid who hadn't done any of those things, but instead had wasted his inheritance on wine, women, and song. Where

was the justice in that? Where was the reward the older son was supposed to get because he had played by the rules and believed the right things.

The older son is a caricature not only of the Pharisees of Jesus' day, but also the Pharisees of our own day. They self-righteously believe that their religious observance of the moral rules, their unswerving belief in the ideology taught by the Church, and their meticulous obsession for correctly stating the doctrines about God makes them more pleasing to God than those who aren't as scrupulous in their religious observance.

Pharisees of all eras are blinded by their obsessions to the true meaning of Jesus' gospel. They cannot see that Jesus came to reveal how much God loves all people, regardless of their moral rectitude, their ideological conformity, or their doctrinal purity. The danger of being a Pharisee in any era is that self-righteousness in one's own morality and right thinking can get in the way of *loving each other*.

I'm not talking about the stereotypical, fundamentalist Christians who believe their purity entitles them to their own heaven. I am talking about all Christians who believe their goodness and rightness make them superior to the lazy people who prefer welfare to work, the African-American teenager who can't speak what we consider proper English, the drunk who cannot shake his addictive disease, the arrogant atheist who accuses us of believing in fairy tales, the professional golfer who violates his marriage vows, the corporate executive who allows greed to overcome his judgment and fiduciary responsibility, the man who divorces his wife because he came to the realization that he is sexually attracted to men rather than women, or any other examples of moral and doctrinal deficiency you can name. Self-righteousness can and does prevent *us* from loving those we consider unrighteous and, therefore, unlovable.

Jesus' parable of the Forgiving Father teaches us that we should not believe what the older son believed: that God owes us something for being the good behaving, right believing people we are. The truth is that none of us deserves God's love. But the Good News in that parable is that God loves all of us, *even those of us who are self-righteous Pharisees*. As Jesus said when he told the story, "His father said [to the older son], 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours.'" God's love isn't limited to the prodigals of our world. *He loves Pharisees, too*. He loves us.

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<sup>1</sup> From interview in *Dramatics Magazine*, January 1975

<sup>2</sup> Scriptural quotations are taken from Eugene Peterson, *The Message* version of the Bible.

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