

Coming home to ourselves and our world

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 31 March 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Lent 4C

Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwL_58f44rA

The beloved parable that we know familiarly as the parable of the prodigal son, doesn't actually have a name in the Bible. In Christian interpretation the story of this father and his two sons is first referenced in terms of "prodigal" in the 4th century when Jerome compared the prodigal son to the prudent son.

There are hugely variant readings of this story among commentators (which is why I think it took me such a long time get started on writing this sermon). Typically, it is told as a story of repentance to encourage modern Christians to repent and return to a God who loves them, who welcomes them home, even though they do not deserve it; a God whose divine grace exceeds all human reason.

It is presented, usually, as an allegory, a detailed symbolic reading; equating the father with God; the younger son with repentant Christian followers of Jesus, and the older son with the hard-hearted Pharisees or the Jewish people. An interpretation which is deeply problematic.

In the past, when I've preached on this text, I have given it an emphasis on reunion and reconciliation, rather than repentance, seeing the story as Barbara Brown Taylor names it "*The parable of the dysfunctional family*." Following this trajectory, the story focuses not on the sons but on the father, who in some senses is a weak patriarch with two rebellious sons. And yet, there is strength in this patriarch; who is willing to sacrifice his honour to keep his community together; who was willing to pay the high cost of reconciliation; sacrificing individual worth, identity and rightness so that those who have been terribly divided may live together in peace.

Initially the father appears shamed by the younger son's choices. Half of the family's land is lost, diminishing their stand in the community. What is a stash of cash, compared to land that has fed his family for generations, which should be held in trust for future generations?

To make matters worse even that money is squandered, lost to the Gentiles. Barbara Brown Taylor, in writing about this text, tells of a Jewish ceremony to deal with such a son—a *qetsatsah* (*ket-sat-sah*). If he ever shows up in the village again, then the villagers can fill a large earthenware jug with burned nuts and corn, break it in front of the son, and shout his name out loud, pronouncing him cut off from his people forever.

In Luke's story, the hungry son having lost everything, eventually risks heading home, with words of remorse in his mind and on his lips. His father sees him while he is "still far off," and is filled with compassion. In a very non-patriarch way, the father runs to the son, puts his arms around him and kisses him right there on the road, where everyone can see them.

Perhaps the embrace is an action of protection as well as affection. This reconciliation may cost him his honour but that is a price he is willing to pay.

The father throws a banquet before the village people can throw a *qetsatsah* (*ket-sat-sah*). The prodigal is saved by being restored to relationship with his father, with the family and with the village.

I like this interpretation, but reading further this week, I have encountered some other interpretative perspectives which question it. And I have become much more interested in the older son, who dutifully stayed home with his father. That interest intensified yesterday when I watched a movie titled: "*Sometimes, always, never*" that references the prodigal son story.

But before I talk a little more about that movie, there are some other matters to attend to.

In Christian allegorical readings of Jesus' parable, thinly veiled anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, is evident in the creation of stark contrasts between what Jesus taught and what "the Jews" of his time generally understood.

Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine, challenges these interpretations that suggest that the Prodigal Son teaches that God loves sinners, whereas the Jews thought that God loved only the righteous. She says this interpretation tears the parable out of its historical context, lessens the message of Jesus, and bears false witness against the Jews and against Judaism.

In the traditions of the Hebrew Bible, God does not give up on sinners. On the contrary, God is always waiting for us to repent and return. Humanity may violate God's covenant, but God remains faithful.

Levine suggests that in its original context, the parable of the Prodigal Son would not have been heard as a story of repentance and forgiveness. Instead, the parable's messages of finding the lost, of reclaiming children, of reassessing the meaning of family offer not only good news, but better news.

Her interpretation, within a first century Jewish context, drew my attention to things that I had not seen before...critiques of both the father and the younger son.

Of the father she notes that Christian commentators who see the younger son as violating his father's honour rarely notice the father's complicity. Had the prodigal sinned in asking his father for his inheritance, then the father should not have acquiesced. The father is to some extent complicit in his son's debauchery.

She also suggests that first-century listeners may have had a less generous response than we do to the younger son's eventual contrition, seeing it as somewhat conniving and calculated. His father has done what he asked once, so he'll have another go at claiming his place as a son.

Levine points out that while he plans to offer to be a servant, he makes frequent reference to his father in ways that suggest he still claims to be a son.

She doesn't believe that the remorse is genuine. His interior monologue reveals his self-absorption. He's got a strategy, she says: "*I'll go to Daddy and sound religious.*"

She also challenges the idea that the father embodies a critique of Jewish understanding of God characterised by Middle Eastern patriarchal fathers who, Christians say (and in interpretations), would have disowned the wayward son in contrast to the God of Jesus.

She claims that the *qetsatsah* ceremony of disowning a son was not a common tradition as Christian interpreters have claimed, and that there is no hint of it in Jesus' parable. Jewish fathers of the first century were not, at least according to the sources that we have, distant or wrathful. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks, "*Is there anyone among you, if his child asks for bread, will give a stone?*" (Matt. 7:9). No, when children ask fathers for bread, fathers provide.

Some commentators today, still regarding the father in the parable as the Father in Heaven, want to credit Jesus with creating a new theology that rejects the supposed Jewish or Old Testament God of wrath in favour of a Christian or New Testament God of love.

Levine remarks with some passion that "*the view that God had a personality transplant somewhere between the pages of Malachi and Matthew, is still alive and well in churches today; and, she says: it is also still a heresy.*"

Reading outside of the usual Christian tradition, there is no compelling reason in the parable itself to see the father as God, but even if Jesus' Jewish audience had made this connection, they would not have found it surprising.

The covenant is still in place; God still loves the wayward. The challenge is not in seeing God's love in a new way; the challenge is in getting the wayward to return.

I admit that this reflection has gone a bit all over the place because of the number of sources I read, first by sharing a relatively enlightened Christian interpretation and then a critique of that. So, the concluding section, I admit, also is going to take us in yet another direction, influenced by reading Amy Jill Levine, but also by the movie "*Sometimes, Always, Never.*" Because both invite attention to the relationship between the father and the older son, the one who had not left but had always been at home.

If we don't assume that the father in Jesus' story is God, then we are free to examine his relationship with his son in both critical and appreciative ways. But, if the father was God, well that just wouldn't really seem right.

The movie is a story about Alan, father of two sons, Peter and Michael, and both these are lost. Michael is literally missing, his whereabouts unknown since he walked out of the family home during an argument about a scrabble game decades earlier.

The other son Peter is metaphorically lost from his father. He has his own family now, a wife and a son, yet his brother's absence haunts both him and his relationship with his father.

Initially, it seems to be a simple father/son story of reconciliation, but it unfolds into a poignant journey of rediscovery and of letting go of the past. It shows the value of communication and the importance of being present in the lives of those you love.

In Alan's character we see the loss and guilt he is experiencing, his life is spent posting leaflets on cars and lampposts always searching for his son. But we also see his attempts to reach out to his remaining family through the power of words and through his skills as a tailor.

The film addresses the impact of the selfishness of the one who left on the extended family. The desertion of one son causes rips and tears in the fabric. But eventually, his absence also manages to bring the family closer together.

The son who is left, who is at home, faces the challenge of dealing with the heartache and loss experienced by their father. But there is also redemption in the story, as familial ties are strengthened, particularly through the healing relationship between Alan and Peter's teenage son Jack, for whom he tailors a suit that helps Jack garner the courage to speak to Rachel, the girl at the bus stop (who, I think, until that time, he had just been standing beside on a daily basis).

Communication is at the heart of that movie, specifically the value of words and how they can provide solace and healing. Once Peter finally begins expressing his aching sense of loss and dislocation to his father, and Alan comes to realise that he has disappeared into that set apart world of grief and mourning to the exclusion of everything and everyone else in his life – well only then can things begin to change.

"Sometimes, always, never" raised questions about the relationship between the father and the son in Jesus' parable, during the time the younger son was lost.

In the parable the other son does return. Usually the exuberance of that return is what preachers focus on and the older son only gets a mention as a contrast to the father's generosity and forgiveness. But, re-reading the story again, after the movie, I saw something overlooked, the love of the father to the older son is also generous, invitational and without boundaries.

At the end of the biblical story, the feasting and rejoicing are left behind as the desperate father tries to make his family whole.

It's almost as if the father did not know until this moment that the elder son was the son who was truly "lost" to him. The story does not end with the party, but with two men in the field, one urging and comforting (assuring him "*child you are always with me and everything I have is yours*"). And the other resisting, vacillating, or reconciled—we do not know.

If we hold in abeyance, at least for the moment, the rush to read repenting and forgiving into the story, then it does something more profound than repeat the messages that we know so well. It provokes us with simple wisdom. Wisdom that tells us: recognize that the one you have lost may be right there - in your own household, in your church, in your community of friends.

Do whatever it takes to find the lost and then celebrate with others, so that you can share the joy and so that others will help prevent the recovered from ever being lost again.

It contains wisdom that tells us:

Don't wait until you receive an apology; you may not ever get one.

Don't wait until you can muster the ability to forgive; you may never find it.

Don't stew in your sense of being ignored, for there is nothing that can be done to retrieve the past.

Instead, go and have lunch. Go and celebrate, and invite others to join you. If the repenting and the forgiving come, so much the better.

And if not, you still will have done what is necessary. You will have begun a process that might lead to reconciliation. You will have opened a second chance for wholeness. Take advantage of a resurrection moment.

Finding the lost takes work. It also requires our efforts, and from those efforts is the potential for wholeness and for joy.

And, for everyone, for all the lost, there is a place called home.

At home with God and with one another.