

4TH SUNDAY IN LENT

MARCH 10, 2013

BUT WHEN HE CAME TO HIS SENSES

Pastor Jim Dunn

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

3 So he told them this parable:

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. **12** And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. **13** Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. **14** And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" **20** And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes

on his feet. **23** And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.

24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. **27** And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.'

28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,

29 but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might

celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' **31** And he said to him,

'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

One TV series that has recently become popular is *Downton Abbey*. It's about an English family of the nobility that lives in a large manor house with their servants in 1920. It is a little like the old series, *Upstairs, Downstairs*. The family dines upstairs, and the servants eat in the kitchen downstairs.

The lord of the manor is Sir Robert Crawley, whose relationship with his three daughters is complicated. He is fond of his daughters. He is certainly not a cold person. But he is after all the lord of the manor. So, he will not allow anyone to second guess him. He is kind of stodgy and old-fashioned. He makes the final decisions in the house. He believes that things should be done in the proper way. This leads him to make decisions on behalf of his daughters that are not loving or warm let alone wise, but always proper. He is both their father and their lord. This makes the relationship between the three daughters and their father complicated.

Does that describe our relationship with God? Certainly God is warm and loving. But He makes the decisions. Certainly we are to do things as He wishes, in the proper way. So, should we relate to God as father, as in a child-parent relationship? Or, should we relate to Him as Lord, as in a servant-master relationship?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son provides the answer.

The older son in the parable, though apparently dutiful, obedient, and mature, reveals through his disrespect of his father that he has all along preferred the servant-master relationship. "Look, these many years I have served you. Yet, where is my fatted calf celebration?" In other words, "I have given you my obedient service. But you have treated me unfairly." Are these the thoughts of a son who served out of love or of a hired servant who wants what is owed him? Was he wrong if he related to his father as hired servant?

The younger son in the parable is harder to figure. "Treat me fairly," is how he starts out. "Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me." Sounds as though he also preferred the servant-master relationship.

But didn't he change his mind later when he began to starve, when he came to himself, when he finally came to his senses? When he does decide to go back, is reconciliation with his father part of his plan? He wants to eat, and he says so. His motive is hunger. When he comes to his senses, he begins to think rationally about how he can stave off starving to death. "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread..."

Yes, he does plan to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." In the telling of this parable, Jesus was addressing a scholarly audience of Pharisees. They would recognize these words as the very words Pharaoh spoke to Moses after the ninth plague and the very words we read in today's Old Testament Reading from Exodus chapter ten.

Now, the Pharisees all knew that Pharaoh was not sincerely repenting when he spoke these words. Pharaoh was just trying to manipulate Moses. Jesus' use of those words of Pharaoh here in this story was no coincidence. The Pharisees understood that this younger son in the story is not sincerely repenting. He is planning to manipulate his father into making him a hired servant, a technical term in that culture for a servant who lives outside the master's house. Not under the master's roof. Keep that distance. Pay me for my services. Maybe I'll earn enough to pay you back for all the money I

wasted. Instead of a son-father relationship, the younger son wants the same as his brother, which is one of the main points of the parable. Both sons want a servant-master relationship with their father.

Is that what we are to have with God?

In *Downton Abbey*, there is a kitchen maid named Daisy. She has a father-in-law who wants to treat her like a daughter. But she hesitates. She married his son only because it was the son's deathbed request. Once a footman at Downton Abbey, the son had returned from WWI critically wounded. He was dying and all he wanted was for Daisy to marry him before he died. She didn't want to. But the cook, Mrs. Patmore, convinced her to do it. Ever since then, her father-in-law wants to treat her like the daughter he never had. She wouldn't have to be a lowly kitchen maid at Downton Abbey for the rest of her life, because he offers her the family farm. But she is reluctant. She finds the relationship awkward. She finds it difficult to deal with him as her father.

As we find it difficult to relate closely to our Father in heaven, because He's someone we can't see or touch. So, if we relate to God, if we find it more comfortable to relate to God as servant-master, if we find it preferable to relate to God in a more formal way, is that okay?

Like the Muslims, are we God's servants and He a law-giving master? If we treat God as master rather than loving parent when we are resentful about how unfair life is, is that okay? If we fear Him as the Lawgiver rather than fear and love Him as our loving parent, is that okay? If we see our sins as breaking God's rules and not as breaking our parent's heart, is that okay? Or, in doing so, are we, like Daisy, rejecting a father's love?

When love is rejected, when a person is hurt, they can do one of two things. They can get revenge, or they can suffer the rejection. God chose to suffer our rejection of His love. Knowing that it's the only way for reconciliation to occur. But His suffering our rejection had to be in such a way as to make reconciliation possible.

So, He did not merely forgive. The parable does not teach that God just decides to forgive sons who don't want to be sons.

No, for reconciliation to be possible, God must come down from His heavenly house and come to His sons and daughters and show us His broken heart in the flesh. Unlike the Muslim god, the true God must come down. He must become human. He must come down from His house, humiliating Himself in public, running out to us reluctant sons and daughters, lifting His robes, baring His legs, stripped of His clothing, hung on a cross and so deflect the sins of our hired servant behavior to Himself.

He must not merely speak words of forgiveness but He comes to us and gives us a human, in-the-flesh, embrace and kiss to close the distance between heaven and ourselves. Jesus suffers the agony of our rejection, of all the sins and faulty thinking that separate us from God as our Father, and He does so out in the open, in public, on a road, conspicuously absent from his own celebration. He does so on a cross.

He comes to us. Without that we would never discover God's broken heart and that our sin is its cause. But with His coming to us, His public suffering, we are overwhelmed by the outpouring of His love into confessing with the younger son that we are not worthy. With the younger son we are loved into stopping with the whole idea of relating to Him as a hired servant. With the younger son we are loved into accepting God's fatherly love and accepting reconciliation with our Father in heaven.

We are loved into serving Him with love and joy. We are loved into calling Him Father or Lord with equal love and affection. That doesn't mean we won't feel like Daisy. It is more natural for us to sense distance from God than closeness.

God knows this. He comes to us.

Amen