Sermon on Lent 4 Year C 2019
(Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; 2 Cor 5:6-11)

We’ve talked about this before, to get things done and to make the kind of “rough and ready” decisions we need to make constantly throughout the day, the human mind relies on what we might call the binary impulse:

on one hand you have this, and on the other you have that: the good, the bad, sin and righteousness. We call it binary thinking and it serves many useful purposes, the broccoli in the fridge has gone bad or not.

Or you deposited your pay check or not, or “you either got the milk and the bread like you promised or you’re sleeping on the couch!”

Binary thinking works well in story-telling too: Matthew uses it to contrast one son who promises to work in the vineyard but never shows up and another son who refuses to go but later repents and goes; Jesus’ point being that words mean relatively little in contrast to one’s actual deeds.

Luke uses the same formula in this famous parable but as he proceeds to tell the story he proceed to blow binary thinking away and leave us in a complex, human world that is both familiar and radical in its call on our lives.

Here’s how it unfolds. As we know, the Pharisees and the scribes are stakeholders in what it means to correctly observe God’s law; and from the beginning of Luke’s account Jesus’ own family is Torah-observant and Jesus himself is obedient to the law.

But at the same time Jesus has been in fierce conflict with these religious leaders about what the larger purposes of God’s law are vis a vis Israel and, ultimately, the kind of life that God desires for all human beings.

So we hear the religious leaders grumbling, he thinks he’s a prophet and yet look who he keeps company with! He welcomes and eats with sinners!

We might brush past this because we know “Jesus is right,” but don’t the religious leaders have a point? If the priest in the parish was known in town as hanging out with what we would call “the criminal element,” welcoming them and eating with them, wouldn’t the Wardens, the council and the parishioners have a right to be concerned?

But before we can really wrestle with that question, Jesus tells us a parable about a man who had two sons.

It’s tempting, because we’ve heard it so often to reduce the story to a lesson about how when we give ourselves over to obvious sins that threaten to destroy us (read the younger son), that there is still hope to find our way home.

While those of us who have never really sown wild oats and are therefore subject to the subtle sins of pride and self-righteousness (read the older brother) can yet realize that God welcomes all and so we too can join God’s communion with prodigal sisters and brothers and thus find ourselves home truly and not just in body.

It’s a valid and insightful way to read the story: it speaks to all of us, as the saying goes there are two kinds of sinners in the world: those who know they’re sinners and those who don’t! Another nice example of binary thinking!

Another way this story has been read that can be helpful is to see the younger son as exhibiting a reliance on faith. Luke, indeed, gives us an extended inside view on how what Christians call “saving faith” happens

The younger son realizes that even the animals are living better than he is; and that, indeed, the home he left is so much better than the fulfillment he thought he’d find.

He rehearses his confession, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.” And the born-again moment, if you will, “this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found!”

While the younger son is exhibiting faith, the older son is pictured as being “enslaved by the law.” In his words, “Listen, for all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.” Instead of helping him, keeping the law has left him embittered.

These ways of looking at the story, though helpful in some ways, use the good person/bad person literary convention which Luke wants, I believe, to undermine.

I’ve found it helpful this past week to read the parable alongside our second reading. We can imagine the Corinthian congregation asking Paul, “but what does it mean to be an ambassador for Christ?” “What does it mean to have a ministry of reconciliation?”

These are important questions, these are crucial questions for any parish, any church if they are going to be more than just a pretty building that brings character to a neighbourhood.

What does it look like for God to make the divine appeal through us to our friends and neighbours that they might be reconciled to God?

If we ask that question, the parable begins to take on a new significance; it also helps us to remember that this is not just a parable about two sons but about a man, a parent if you will, who had two sons!

As we begin to think about these questions, the Father’s initial actions towards these sons and his responses to their very different plights begins to come into view and therein, as they say, is the fuller meaning of this tale.

As many scholars have pointed out the actions of the younger son in asking for his inheritance in the way that he did and then going off and doing what he did is equivalent to an angry teenager or young adult saying “you’re the worst parent in the world, I wish you were dead.”

When we consider this, the Father’s willingness to honour the younger son’s ill-advised request is phenomenal in its own right; it is a grace-filled response that is deeply challenging to us.

It asks us to consider the reality that God doesn’t stand over us with a stick waiting to give us a whack when we full out of line but allows us go our way. God’s desire that we freely choose our destiny, that we not be manipulated into doing the right thing but genuinely own it, is non-controlling.

It genuinely “lets go” in order that true love might flourish. If this is God’s stance vis a vis all of us, vis a vis the world then we become God’s ambassadors, then God’s appeal is made through us, when we realize that the first task in proclaiming the gospel is to reckon with people’s genuine choices and respect those choices

We may all be sinners, but I’ve come to realize that I can’t really tell anyone that; I have to allow them to discover it; just as I’ve had to discover it for myself.

Of course, words of warning, words of encouragement have their place; though the story doesn’t tell us this, I can imagine that the father of the younger son would have sought to persuade him not to go, but he didn’t insist, he “let go.”

God allows us the freedom to “come to our right minds” and begin the journey back to God.

Similarly, we are ambassadors for Christ when we practice grace-filled responses towards each to each other when we inevitably come up against a brother and sister who is struggling with pride and self-righteousness

Typically this takes on the guise of a kind of passive-aggressive reach for control. You and I have both seen this exhibited in clergy, lay leaders and parishioners who don’t consult; or manipulate, or gossip and judge others.

I’m sure we’ve all been guilty of this from time to time; the point is not “who’s done this and who hasn’t,” even that attempt is a self-righteous attempt at “us” and “them,” but the way God responds to it and therefore how we can respond.

What we see in the parable is a breaking of the binary of bad/good son via the presence of a third; this amazingly, counter-cultural father (in the ancient world father’s didn’t run, especially towards a covenant-breaking son) who displays great affection and largesse with his possessions towards the older brother, “all that is mine is yours.”

It’s like the crazy-grace-filled generosity of a God who looks at the whole world, whether they’ve repented or not, as the New Creation, and then invites you and I to be equally as “crazy,” as equally grace-filled.

You and I, in the power of Christ, along with God and his Christ, are this third person, you and I are called to break the binary; we are, in Paul’s words, the righteousness of God because for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin.

That’s not how our mind works; indeed it blows our minds, but that’s just the kind of story we need!