



March 18, 2007

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“To bring us all back together”

We are moving into spring and it's high time! I am gearing up to move the patio furniture into the yard, to hang my wind chimes, and to clean and restock the bird feeders with seed.

I love sitting outside, enjoying the peace of nature. But the peace of nature is sometimes interrupted. The birds at the feeders often squabble. They peck and shove each other, jockeying for the best position to gobble seed. They fuss and fight and flit back and forth. I actually enjoy watching this.

You may wonder why! I think it's because I'm a parent of four children. The birds' fighting reassures me that it's not always “poor parenting” that leads little creatures to fight with each other. I don't think the birds all had parents who failed to teach them to get along. There is simply something in their nature that sets them squawking and squabbling.

Kids fuss and fight, don't they? No matter how hard we try to teach them to get along. But we all know kids aren't the only ones who fight. Spouses all face times of disagreement; adult children and their parents don't always see eye to eye; all work settings have struggles and “office politics”. Even churches sometimes look more like bird feeding stations than the kingdom of God on earth!

Today's Gospel lesson tells a familiar story: the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We often see this story as an illustration of God's call to conversion. We say, “If you are lost, if you are struggling, if you have made mistakes and strayed far from the path you intended to follow in life--- then come home to God who is waiting for you. It doesn't matter what you have done, God still loves you and longs for your return. God will rejoice, and celebrate, welcoming you with loving arms.”

This is definitely one of the messages of the parable. The story even goes into how “astray” the younger son went--- so the point will really hit home. The younger son, in asking for his share of his father’s property was basically saying, “Dad, I don’t want to hang around here until you’re dead. Give me what would be mine THEN right NOW, and I’m outta here!” Jewish law required the father to give two-thirds of his estate to his oldest son, so the younger son would have taken one-third of his father’s wealth. Not only did he treat his father with disrespect, the young man quickly slid deeply into depravity. He spent all the money in wild, “dissolute” living. He ended up in foreign parts, doing what was expressly forbidden by Jewish law: feeding pigs. And the pigs ate better than he did.

Jesus’ hearers were surely appalled and aghast at this description of the son’s behavior. Jesus’ details leave no doubt: this guy was far, far gone. Yet his father still welcomed him home. Not only did he welcome him, he did nothing to punish him. He didn’t say, “Well, son, have you learned your lesson?” Not only were there no reprimands, no “I told you so”s, no punishment for wrongdoing-----the father actually REWARDED him for coming home, by throwing a big party.

Jesus’ hearers were surely even MORE aghast and appalled by the father’s welcome than they were by the son’s behavior. Jewish faith and tradition gave opportunities for sinners to return to the fold. But they required some penance and restitution. Christian tradition has also given opportunities for sinners to return to the fold, but we also expect remorse, contrition, confession, repentance.

So, this parable teaches us that God will welcome us with open arms, if only we’ll return to him. But it teaches us additional truths.

One is that God’s generosity may be hard for us to take, if we, like the older brother, have been diligent and dutiful in trying to live right and follow God’s laws and teachings. This parable shows we’re a lot like the birdies at a birdfeeder. The older brother had a solid, safe place at the feeder, where his feet could be firmly planted and no other bird could push him off. At one point his brother managed to knock over a big pile of seed, which he consumed himself. That was upsetting enough—but later, when his brother returned, there he was, being given as good a place at the feeder as his older brother! Like the birds with their ruffled feathers, the brothers couldn’t feed peacefully together.

This parable could be called the “Parable of the two Lost Sons”, because the older brother was lost in his anger, resentment and inability to forgive. Just as the father ran out to the road to greet his younger son as he was returning, the father left the party to talk to his older son, begging him to come in. The father told him ALL the

birdseed in the feeder is available to him, and he will never be in want. “Please come in and join us; it’s not the same without you there; let’s celebrate together!” The parable ends without telling us the second brother’s response to his father’s heartfelt appeal.

So, the second message of the parable is that we are not only creatures who stray away from God and get lost--- we are also creatures who are alienated from EACH OTHER, lost to our brothers and sisters as well as our heavenly parent. This story Jesus told calls us to return to God and to be reconciled with one another. If you ever wonder what God is up to in this world, remember this parable. It summarizes in a few words what God is doing. God’s plan is this: to bring us all back together—back to him and back to each other. God, you , me, everyone—all of us are included; no one is left out. When you are discouraged by disagreements and conflict, at school, at work, among your friends, in your family, remember this.

Remember how, in the book of Genesis, we are told stories of the first human family? The Bible teaches that the very first siblings that ever were had a serious fight. Adam and Eve had Cain and Abel. They grew up to adulthood together, making their way through whatever conflict they encountered along the way. But one day they each made an offering to God. Cain was a farmer and brought produce from the land. Abel was a shepherd and brought meat for an offering. The Bible tells us God was not so much a vegetarian—apparently he was most excited about steak! He chose Abel’s offering FIRST—over Cain’s. I think of this as God putting Abel’s drawing on the refrigerator with a magnet, but not Cain’s drawing. So, Cain got really angry and he killed his brother Abel.

Next time your kids or grandkids are squabbling, remember this story. The first siblings that ever were—one killed the other! This is what people are like. The Bible shows this over and over. Scripture teaches that we are estranged, and God is in our midst, calling us to get back together.

We run into this in our personal lives—it’s not hard to recognize the patterns. But this is also true for us globally. Nations, regions, tribes, ethnic groups, language groups, religious groups fight with each other; God’s children still kill each other—brothers and sisters in deadly rivalry.

This is not God’s plan. It breaks his heart. He begs us all to end our conflict. God yearns to bring us all back together, back to him and back to each other.

How can we manage it? If our nature is so much like the birds fighting at the feeder, how can we do it? The answer is in our Epistle reading for today. In this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul tells us that when we become followers of

Jesus Christ, we are to “regard no one from a human point of view”. We’re to see others as Christ sees them. If we wonder how Christ sees them—well, the parable he told about the two lost sons gives us an idea.

Paul teaches that God has given us the “ministry of reconciliation”. We are “ambassadors for Christ” who is “making his appeal through us”. Do you think you could start each new day with this perspective? Can you see yourself getting dressed for your day, eating breakfast, remembering EVERY MORNING, to pray, “God, today, show me how to be your agent, your ambassador. Remind me to see every person I encounter through your eyes. Give me the words to say all through the day, so I say ONLY WHAT HELPS. Show me how to bring people to you, and how to bring people alongside each other.”

To do this, to see others as Christ sees them, to be ambassadors—we need to read the Bible. We don’t KNOW how Christ sees others without reading the descriptions of what he said and did. We can’t represent someone we know little about. So Bible study is a part of God’s big project here. The more we read of Jesus’ doings, teachings and stories, the more we will learn about how Jesus sees people- and the more we will be able to be his faithful ambassadors.

We are the ones God wants to enlist in his great plan: to bring us all back together. We are not given the job of scaring people, shaming people, punishing people. We are given the job of letting them know about the party God’s putting on, and how it won’t be complete until everyone is there! Amen.