

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | Luke 15:1–3, 11b–327

Date | March 27, 2022



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

I wonder if you've ever done something that you truly regretted? Something you have found hard to shake off after it happened. Words you wished you could take back? A relationship you wish you could piece back together? Lent is a good time for us to give some thought to such things. A time of self-examination, of exploring what those wrong turns along the road have left you with. Not that you might spend these forty days wallowing, but that you might name that which still binds you, holds you back, in hopes of being released from it.

The story of the prodigal son is about many things. The relationship between fathers and sons. The expectations of family and tradition. The sense of place and where it is we say we most belong. Today I'd like to invite us to see another element of the story: the presence and power of shame.

One of the challenges we face in reading the Bible is that certain stories become so familiar we find it hard to see them as they might have been seen in their first light. Our natural inclination in the story of the prodigal son is to see it as a homecoming story. And it is. It's a wonderful celebration of grace, of gratuitous love, spendthrift in its jubilation that the one who was lost has been found.

It is easy, therefore, to see the events that lead up to that return home as merely the necessary plot devices of the inevitable end if this is a story about the God we know in Jesus. Yet, if we dwell with the first part of the story we are gifted a vision of what it might have felt like before that return – the stuckness of not yet having found the way back. It is here, I believe that we see the dominance of shame in creating the inertia that leaves the son languishing with the pigs and the father not yet in search of his lost child.

The lens through which our ancient forebears first heard this story was profoundly colored by a culture of honor and shame. Through the eyes of ancient near east society the younger son's actions transgress multiple markers of honor. Not only does he leave his homeland prematurely, and so fail to honor his father and mother as the covenant of the law requires him to do, he squanders the value of his ancestral land, seen not only as a gift of family but as a gift from God. In leaving his homeland, he settles among gentiles, with the story emphasizing practices considered unclean to the Jewish imagination – prostitution and pig-rearing. Essentially, the young man unmoors himself from all that gives him identity – family, land and religion – and in doing so brings shame upon his family and upon himself.

Shame drives much of the parable's story. The younger son's premature departure leaves his family behind in shame. The son himself faces the shame of dwelling with unclean animals and the loss of his sense of self. The older son cannot see the return of his brother as anything other than a betrayal of the honor and shame system he has been brought up into.

Part of the power of shame is that it expects judgment. That certainly would have been the expectation of those first hearers, conditioned within the honor-shame cultural codes of the time. Judgment would have expected to meet the son on his return. It is clearly the working assumption of the younger son, that his shaming of the family disallows him re-entry as the son he had once been. For he has lost himself, and now can only expect to be allowed back in as less than he was before. For those first hearers of the story that the only recourse the father has left is to disown his son on his return. For set within a world bounded by honor and tradition shame changes everything.

Whether we care to admit it or not, shame can be an immensely powerful part of our own stories. How many of us here today have a story to tell that is also weighed down by shame? A story about things we have done, or failed to do. Relationships we couldn't mend. We can feel shame for our actions, over our bodies. We can even feel shame not only for ourselves but for others.

My own family had to learn to live with the shame of mental illness. Categorically, there is nothing whatsoever shameful about being mentally ill, but the social experience of living with or having a family member suffer mental illness can be profoundly shame-inducing. Growing up for the longest time, the mental illness in my own family was akin to a secret we never spoke of outside of the house, and if we did it was done so either in whispers or as the recipients of other people's pity or kindness. As a child I can vividly remember lying when someone asked me how my mother was because I felt so ashamed. Shame got us all stuck, and it was years until I could articulate the damage that shame had done. I wonder what weight of shame you have been carrying with you?

Shame is often where we get stuck, yet it is not where we belong. We belong on the return leg of the journey, on our way home, embraced by a God who draws us in.

What you'll notice about the story is the son's intention to name that which has brought them shame. He is ready to confront his past and face the consequences. Yet the wonderful element of the story of the prodigal son is the spendthrift forgiveness of the father. The father seemingly has no interest in the son's confession. All the father sees is the return. I have often imagined the father in the story running and panting down the road, urging every fiber of his being to be reunited with his son. I have no doubt that the almost sheer abandon of the father's embrace was an immense shock to those who first heard it, and if we are honest about it, the prospect of our complete and unconditional acceptance by God is a shock to us too when we let that truth sink into our being.

To hear, to really hear that we are utterly and unreservedly loved of God, accepted without condition, is not a word that life typically speaks to us, which is why this story in so many ways lies at the very heart of the Christian faith. For there is nothing more important we can say of God than the good news that says we are welcome home. For it is when we can realize that we are loved and received that we finally can let down our guard enough to hear what God has to say to us. It is when we can surrender ourselves into the arms of God's loving embrace that we can know how deeply God delights in us. And it is only from that place of knowing God's delight in us that we will be set free to delight in the world.

Whatever memories of hurt and failure, of being far-off from the road you had hoped to travel on that you might carry, I pray that these days of Lent might gift you the freedom to name that which you carry and then lay those burdens down. 'For while we were still have off, God met us in his Son, and brought us home'. Blessings to you as you find your way there. ✝