

A Long Way Home – Lent 4 Sermon  
March 18, 2012

The parable of the two sons is a lesson in contrasts. The only thing these two brothers have in common is a father. The older brother is dutiful and obedient to a fault. He does what he is told and colors in the lines. He is the responsible one. The younger son – well – he's not any of those things. He is one of those free spirits that has to learn every lesson the hard way. He lives his life outside the box – for him, the box of conformity is a prison. The older brother stays home and keeps the home fires burning. The younger brother is nowhere to be found lighting fires of a different kind.

Neither one bears any resemblance to their father.

It just so happens that when Jesus told this story, he told it to two very different groups of people; religious people and sinners. The religious people were dutiful and obedient to the Law. They never skipped their religious chores and they were responsible for keeping the faith – to a fault. The sinners were a more diverse bunch. Some had diseases that made them unclean and therefore, sinners. Some chose to feed their families rather than pay temple dues. That made them sinners. Some were tossed out by husbands and had to beg or sell their bodies. Some were so in debt to Rome they had to collect Roman taxes from their own people. Some of these tax collectors saw an opportunity to take a little more for themselves and they took it. Whether they did or didn't extort money from friends and family they were sinners. Some had just given up trying to live up to impossible standards. Some just did their own thing. All these people were sinners the religious folks had written off.

Jesus told a story about two very different brothers to two very different audiences.

A couple of years ago I stumbled upon a story out of Warsaw, Ohio. The *Columbus Dispatch* (August 10, 2010) reported on a very unusual protest taking place on the public spaces in front of New Beginnings Ministries church. Pastor Bill Dunfee got out of his Nissan with a Bible in one hand and his sermon in the other. Strip-club owner Tommy George got out of his orange Dodge Challenger with a Mountain Dew in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

*Inside the New Beginnings Ministries church, Dunfee's worshippers wore polyester and pearls. Outside, George's strippers wore bikinis and belly rings.* Both groups agreed it was the sinners vs. the saints, but Tommy George said it was up to America to decide which is which and who is who. Pastor Dunfee said God already had decided. "Tom George is a parasite, a man without judgment," Dunfee said. "The word of Jesus Christ says you cannot share territory with the devil."

Up to this point it had been the members of New Beginnings protesting at the sinners. Every weekend for four years Dunfee and members of his church would stand in front of the Foxhole strip club holding signs, video cameras, and shouting in bullhorns. They videotaped customers' license plates and posted them online. They also tried to save the souls of all those who came and went.

After four years of that the dancers *turned the tables*. They decided to finally accept the invitation to come to New Beginnings - only they showed up in see-through clothes carrying Super Soakers. They showed up with lawn chairs and grills. They sat in front of the church and waved at passing cars. A few of the dancers had scripture on their signs:

- Matthew 7:15: Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing
- Revelations 22:11: He that is unjust, let him be unjust still

The churchgoers mostly ignored the dancers except for one guy who stopped, took a dancer's hand and prayed for her salvation. Lola, the 42-year-old dancer he prayed with said she was grateful for his prayers.

Gina Hughes soaked up the sun in her striped bikini in front of New Beginnings church, mostly oblivious to the fire and brimstone being preached inside. The 30-year-old married mother of six said at the time that she had danced at the Foxhole for a decade and held the title of "house mom." That means that she both danced and watched out for the six other women who worked there. She said she made \$2,000 a week. She went on to say, "These church people say horrible things about us. They say we're home wreckers and whores. The fact of the matter is we're working to keep our own homes together, to give our kids what they need."

Pastor Dunfee said it's not that simple. He said he consistently offers the women help, a chance at redemption. "I tell them, 'I will put a roof over your heads, and your bills will be paid, and your children's bellies will be full,'" Yet they don't come inside.

As these odd protests continued on Sundays, Dunfee decided to pipe the sermon outside. But that "agitated" them, he said, and made them dance in the streets. He said their presence has united his church members and reinvigorated their mission to shut down the club. "They have now seen the evil firsthand," Dunfee said. "This has just made us stronger."

Tommy George laughed at that notion. "They're just mad," he said, "because their wives won't let them come to my club."

(Article may be found at <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2010/08/09/of-ire-and-brimstone.html>)

As crazy as this story is, it honestly isn't all that different from the Pharisees and the sinners listening to Jesus as he told the story of the prodigal son.

If Jesus wandered into Warsaw, Ohio I'm thinking he would talk to those strippers, maybe even pull up a chair and have a burger. He wouldn't shame them. He wouldn't condemn them. He wouldn't threaten them with eternal damnation. He certainly would not call them evil. But I do think he would preach – but not in an obnoxious know-it-all way.

I can see him telling them the story of a son that took off and got on a path that led to poverty, depression, and loneliness. I can see him telling that crowd about a father that waited for his son to return, just so he could love him. I can see him telling bikini clad women about a father that ran to his son the second he saw him - and he didn't berate him – he didn't shame him – he didn't make demands – no – he embraced him with unconditional love. I can see Jesus sitting in a lawn chair, telling a story like that.

I can also see the folks of New Beginnings church standing on the steps, with sour faces and arms folded. I can see the disgust on their faces because Jesus was associating with people they believed to be evil. I can hear them murmuring their disapproval to each other. How would Jesus react to these folks?

I'm guessing react like a father who went out to his hard-working son and begged him to come to the party. He would invite those folks to join him. What the folks at New Beginnings might do with such an invitation would be up to them. Jesus would love them either way.

It seems like some folks can be so busy being religious that they forget to be Christian.

It is easy to pick on New Beginnings because they seem to be especially condemning and abrasive – but it can happen to any of us. We can get so busy being religious and maintaining the institution of church that we forget to be Christian. We can get so caught up in chasing members and filling committees that we forget that our first calling is to reach out in love to the broken and lost, regardless of the cost. We can get so judgmental and nitpicky that we might as well put a “do not disturb” sign on the door. And once we do that, we’ve missed the party.

When I think about that younger son, sitting in the middle of nowhere in the company of pigs, starving and alone – I imagine all the folks around us who can identify with him. Right here in Norwalk – folks who’ve messed up their lives – folks who have burned bridges with family – folks who have made one poor choice after another – folks who are victims of circumstance – sitting alone – starving for a place to belong and a gracious welcome. Do people know they will find that here?

Ultimately the son chose to go home because he knew something about his father. He knew how his father treated others. That faint memory is what gave him the idea to go home.

What do people outside our church know about us? Does the way we treat others 24/7 communicate that is safe to come here?

If I could write my own ending to the story of saints vs. strippers it would go something like this. Pastor Dunfee would read to his flock the story of the prodigal son to talk about the virtues of obedience. He might say a word or two about the angry older brother that doesn’t want to give up anything for his brother. And suddenly someone in the congregation would stand and say – “Hey! We’re acting like that older brother!” He would march down the center aisle and go out to the street where the gospel is lived. He would sit with the strippers and listen to them – and speak kindly to them – and tell them they are much loved children of God. And then the whole church would follow, except for a few cranky people who don’t want to move. (There’s a few in every crowd). A celebration would break out on the lawn – strangers would become friends – and everyone there would realize that there is grace enough for all.

What actually happened at New Beginnings church is that a woman who ministers to strippers in San Diego read the story and flew to Ohio. She and an ex-stripper turned Christian brought the message. They urged the congregation to rethink the parking-lot protests outside the Foxhole and suggested better ways to reach the strippers. The ex-stripper said to the congregation: “It’s not our job to tell these women that it’s time to get out of there...Just love them. Let the Holy Spirit draw them out.”

One by one, women from the church began filing into the street, hugging the strippers and apologizing to them, leaving both sides brimming with emotion. “The girls inside really had an impact,” New Beginnings member Kim Johnson said of the sermon by these two women. “They made me realize I need to be more compassionate.”

Pastor Dunfee was one of the last people out of the church. He went straight to stripper Laura Meske, who identified herself only as Lola in the first story. “You think I’m a whore,” Meske told Dunfee before finally accepting his embrace. “I’m not. I’m trying to take care of my kids.”

(Follow up article, August 16, 2010 - <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2010/08/16/a-sign-of-forgiveness.html>)

We’re not called to judge – we’re called to love. Enough said. Amen.