

Welcome Home – Lent 5
March 25, 2012

The story of the prodigal son is rife with family discord, extravagant living, self-destruction, self-promotion, pain, and drama. If American television is any indication of the kind of things we are into – it is these things. Do I need to say any more than “Housewives of Orange County” or “Jersey Shore?” We get sucked into the drama. When the parts are divvied up in Sunday School everyone wants to be the prodigal son – he gets to have all the fun. The problem is that we can get so seduced by the juicy details that we completely overlook the main character – the father. It is easy to miss that this is first a parable about God.

Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of a five year old asking, “What is God like?” How do you answer? What picture pops into your head? One way to get at an answer is to ask: “What does God care about? What is God’s passion?” These are questions that tap our understanding of God.

What scripture gives us are stories and passages that speak in images and metaphors. God is like a king, a shepherd, a mother hen, a potter. God is our rock, a judge, a friend. No one image adequately answers the question, “What is God like?” God is like all those things and more!

If you take all the images and metaphors used to describe God in scripture they seem to group together into two very different models or pictures of God. It turns out that these two different understandings of God have been present throughout history. They are so different that they have created two completely different strands of what it means to be a faithful Christian.

On the one hand there is an understanding of God as a lawgiver and judge. On the other hand there is an understanding of God as a lover.

Most of us grew up being taught that God is a divine lawgiver and judge. The moral of every Sunday School lesson was, “and that is why you should obey...” God laid down the law and will judge how well we’ve kept it. No one can keep the law perfectly so sacrifice was required to atone for our disobedience. Many Christians believe that Jesus was the once and for all sacrifice for the atoning of our sin.

In this understanding of God, God loves us, but still has requirements of us. God’s acceptance is conditional. God will accept us if we repent a certain way or believe a certain thing. Sin, guilt, and forgiveness are central to those who understand God this way. We are constantly on guard and being judged.

Understanding God as judge draws lines between people – the saved and unsaved. In the end, in God’s final judgment, it is believed that God will come and wipe out all those who didn’t get it right. So people become preoccupied with their own salvation and very little else.

When God is lawgiver and judge you have to be good because you will be called to account, and meet the requirements, all so you can be saved.

This understanding of God is so entrenched in the language of the church that we don't even think about it. We just assume that is the way it is. When we believe that Jesus HAD to die for our sins we are operating out the God as judge model of understanding. When we tell others what they HAVE to do to be saved we are portraying God as judge.

I know this all sounds quite academic – but it matters. How we understand the character of God impacts the way we live out our lives of faith.

So what is the other model of God? God as lover. When we realize God is in love with – God yearns for us, it changes everything. But we need to also remember that God loves everyone – not just a special few. When we understand God as lover we come to recognize that God concerned about the well-being of God's children in the here and now – not wanting anyone to live under the heavy hand of oppression or slavery. Social justice becomes a means by which to address the well-being of all creation. In this understanding of God, God is compassionate. God has a passion for justice. In this understanding of God, God invites us into relationship and because of that relationship, we love what God loves and we care about the things God cares about..

(The Character of God by Dr. Marcus Borg
www.explorefaith.org/LentenHomily03.24.00.html)

A number of years ago Bill Moyers did a documentary on missionary activity. On one end of the spectrum he documented Christians delivering pamphlets and Bibles, installing satellites for television (so they could watch televangelists) to people who were barely surviving. The goal was conversion to Christianity.

On the other end of the spectrum were missionaries digging wells, teaching agricultural practices, opening medical clinics, relieving suffering and advocating for the most vulnerable. The goal was to demonstrate God's compassion for all.

Two different understandings of God – two different expressions of faith – which one is right?

I look to the parable of the prodigal son. The father's behavior is surprising. While the son is still a long way off the father hikes up his robe and runs to him – a dignified patriarch would never do such a thing! He then kisses the boy passionately. He interrupts the son's speech with excited commands to his servants. In a frenzy of joy he fully reinstates his son. He left behind his honor, his dignity, his position, and his community standing all to welcome the son home.

I say this behavior is surprising because running was thought to offend the dignity of a man. Secondly, he doesn't demand anything of the son. There are no requirements for acceptance. The son is in no way punished or tested. Then he proceeds to kiss his son like a mother might kiss a child. (This detail is more evident in the original language.) (David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide*).

If all you had ever been taught about God was that God was like a judge standing at the ready to condemn you – this story might come as a shock. The judge is nowhere to be found. All we see is a loving father, willing to sacrifice everything to welcome home his beloved child.

The life and ministry of Jesus exemplifies this same sacrificial love. He risks humiliation and condemnation to seek and save the lost. He risks punishment to advocate for the most vulnerable. He leaves behind his reputation to eat with sinners. He sacrifices everything - not because God demanded it – but because that is what love does.

So the next time a child asks, “What is God like?” you might answer it like Jesus answered it: “There once was a father with two sons.....”

Amen.

Invitation to Communion

There is a song I was forced to sing as a child that I cannot stand. I think everyone thought it was cute because it was like a little anatomy lesson and the actions were fun. It went like this:

(VS 1) Oh, be careful little ears, what you hear (repeat)

For the Father Up above,
Is looking down in love,
So be careful little ears
what you hear.

(VS 2) Oh, be careful little eyes, what you see, (repeat)

(VS 3) Oh, be careful little mouth, what you say, (repeat),

(VS 4) Oh, be careful little hands, what you do (repeat),

(VS 5) Oh, be careful little feet where you go (repeat)

(VS 6) Oh, be careful little mind what you think (repeat)

(VS 7) Oh, be careful little heart what you love (repeat)

Talk about mixed messages! Be careful sounds like a warning! And yet the father is looking down in love?

The song is basically saying – be a good little boy or girl – or else.... The father who loves you will have to zap you!

This table does not come with a warning. It is, quite simply, an invitation to experience the loving embrace of God. The hope is that you will receive this invitation and let this gift of amazing grace transform you.

Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them – that is good news for all of us!