

## Sermon Lent 4

### Luke 15:11-32

This week on Thursday afternoon, at the *Ripple Effect*, one of the Lenten programs we're running, I was profoundly moved by the speaker on the video as she talked about the parable of the Lost Son. This parable, which coincidentally is our Gospel reading today, is beyond famous. The story permeates the art culture of our western world. You might remember that three years ago I preached on the reading using Rembrandt's very famous painting called the *Return of the Prodigal Son* which is hung in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia, and which remains on my bucket list of places to go and visit. I've put a slice of it up on the screen to remind you. I'm sure that some of you will have heard a sermon on this parable many times and this will be the third time that I have preached on it. But I was so moved by Wendy's words on Thursday that I'm using it as the basis for our sermon today. I do hope and pray that her message will move you too.

So the *Ripple Effect* program is about equipping us to be have conversations with our non-Christian friends and family about faith. Much of it is about building understanding of how our story connects with God's story, and being able to talk to non-Christian people about this, and potentially ask the question as to how their story might also connect with God's story. This week we were taking about brokenness: the brokenness of our world and our own brokenness. In many ways it's not hard to talk to people about the world's brokenness. With modern technology, the news is in our faces all the time, and it's rarely good. Our screens are filled with stories of war, disaster, and violence. Stories of dysfunction at the global level, the national level and the

local level occur only too often. I think that these stories are a product of a world that has turned its back on God.

I expect that when you meet up with non-Christian friends and talk about the ways of the world, that many of you would despair together and even agree that as things currently stand, our world is broken. But have you taken that next step and wondered with your friends, that if there was a God, what would God think or feel about this broken state of affairs? I think that God despairs about our broken world, the world that God so lovingly created, and that God weeps with us over our world, and that God also weeps for us in our own brokenness. But God is a God of mercy, forgiveness and grace. God can restore and heal us if we have faith and believe. Let's take a look at our Gospel reading today and see how this story crosses with our story.

Well as you've heard me say before, one of the techniques used by the Gospel writers to make important points, is repetition. In chapter 15 of Luke's gospel, we have a triptych of parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost sons. And the chapter launches this trio of parables by opening with a scene in which Jesus is teaching once more on his journey to Jerusalem. The narrative goes:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable.

The telling of these three parables, each thematically aligned, saying the same thing, is a response to the push back that Jesus was receiving from the Pharisees and scribes, who were becoming quite threatened by his

teachings. And on this particular occasion, the accusation was that “**This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.**” Jesus’ response, with these parables, is both a defense and justification for celebrating God’s acceptance of everyone. In the first two parables Luke tells of God’s joy over repentant sinners using the metaphors of the lost sheep and the lost coin. And in the third parable, our parable today, about a lost son and his brother, Jesus invites us in, draws us into a family situation which we can surely relate to, and challenges us to welcome sinners and even eat with them.

Well I don’t know about you, but I always say, scratch the surface of any family and you’ll find a story or two. In my family, my father and his sister conducted a vitriolic war across countries throughout their entire lives. Fortunately, 6 of their children refused to carry the family vendetta into the next generation. This situation makes it disturbingly easy for me to enter into this parable and its characters.

Probably most of us are quite familiar with the story. The younger son asks for his inheritance in advance, receives it and goes off into the world and spends it, living the high life, until there is nothing left. In a moment of reflection, as he works far away as a hungry farm hand, he realizes that his life would be a whole lot better if he worked for his generous father. So he goes home where he is welcomed by his father who promptly organizes a party for this son, to celebrate his return.

This parable is about the brokenness of our relationships. The failure of family relationships is profound and deeply upsetting to all those involved. There are those who hurt and those who are hurt. And often these roles cycle through many times as people’s behaviour becomes habitual. How many of

us have been the younger son? The one who willfully turns away from God, who leaves the fold and goes off trusting in his own strength or resources. And our modern world of self-determination and individualism promotes and supports this way of being. How deeply hurtful would it have been for the father when the son completely rejects him? Isn't this what we do to God? When we ourselves take what we want from this beautiful world that God created, but choose to live apart from the God who made us, we run the danger of becoming separated from God, from creation and from each other.

And in some ways, these 21<sup>st</sup> century issues are probably not too dissimilar from those of 2000 years ago when Jesus was preaching the good news to the doubters back then. And the parable of the two sons reflects many of the world's family dynamics today and yesterday. Perhaps as you listened to the story, you weren't imagining yourself as the younger son. Perhaps you were imagining yourself as the father. Perhaps you have a wayward child, to whom you have given and given, and forgiven and forgiven. Perhaps you were remembering the pain of family separation and then the extreme joy when, out of nowhere, something is going right, and reconciliation, wholeness became possible. That feeling of peace and reconciliation among people. When this happens, I think it's a God thing. In some mysterious way, we are drawn together, we are given the strength and love, to forgive, and our relationships are restored.

Or perhaps in the story, you were you relating to the older brother? How many of you have been the good child? I know I was! The one who stays home and dutifully performs to parental expectation. Perhaps you were disturbed when your younger brother went off, but perhaps not. But you were definitely disturbed when he was welcomed back with open arms by

your father after wasting all of his inheritance! Perhaps you can sympathize as the angry, self-righteous words come tumbling out of the older brother's mouth.

'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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

To which the father, thinking only in terms of lost and found, replies:

Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

Jesus invites us into the celebration and the restoration, and he challenges us to welcome the sinner. And we're all sinners. Whether we're blatant and obvious, like the younger brother, or somewhat more subtle in our disconnection from God, like the older brother, who has disowned his younger brother, reduced his father to a meal ticket and resents the reduction of family wealth that his brother's return implies.

How do you talk to your friends about brokenness? The world's brokenness can be a conversation starter, but what about our own brokenness? One way to approach it might be to ask if you or your friends been hurt by the brokenness of others? Do you or your friends have a wound that needs healing? Perhaps this is an entry point, our hurt inflicted by others. Perhaps in sharing our vulnerability, we are then able to say that it is through Jesus that we are healed. It is through Jesus who forgives us, and our brothers and sisters, that we can ourselves can forgive, and move forward in our lives.

Our lives don't need to be defined by the hurts that we have received, or those that we have inflicted. In God's forgiveness of our sins and those of others, we are healed. How freeing is that? The sense of empowerment and security that arises from knowing that we are forgiven, and live in the hope of a future with our eternal God, these are the core truths of our Christian faith. I always recall the scripture from Matthew's gospel when Jesus is asked by Peter how often should I forgive my brothers and sisters, as many as seven times? And Jesus responds to him "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." In forgiveness we too are healed, and we can move forward in hope and confidence. Isn't this a message that you can talk to your friends about?

Let us pray.

Loving God, we thank you that you sent your Son Jesus Christ to live among us, to share our suffering here on earth, and to show us the way. We pray that we too can be people who can show the way to our friends and family who do not know you yet. We pray that we too can be forgiving as our Lord Jesus was forgiving. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.