

To read the gospel lesson this morning, I am going to ask for a couple of volunteers to read the parts. I will read the part of the narrator which is Jesus. Because you know I have a need to be Jesus. So I need the following parts:

Younger son

Older son

Father

Servant

This story is a parable which is a story that is told which has several layers of meaning. As we read this story this morning, I invite you to be thinking about who you most relate to in this story. After we read you are free to share who you can relate to and it would be great if you could tell us why.

Read Luke 15: 11-32

Who here is willing to say they relate most to the father?

Oldest son that stayed home?

Youngest son that went off and spent the family inheritance?

Wild women?

This parable was mentioned in the Bible study on Wednesday night and I discovered that this is a parable that really stirs up the emotions. It stirs up the emotions, I think, because the characters in the story are people that many of us can relate to. Some of us are the oldest brother who has been responsible their whole life and doesn't feel it's fair when others get all the breaks in life.

Others of us are the youngest son who has really made some pretty big mistakes in our life and we are seeking reconciliation. Others of us are the father in this story who has felt the pain of a loved one disappoint you.

But this parable also stirs up our emotions because this is a parable which is almost like an alternative universe from the one we live in. It is like that parallel universe in the old Star Trek series. The one where Spock has the goatee. Cause in our universe we count things. We are good counters. We keep track of how much money someone has. We keep track of how often someone does something nice for us. We keep track of how often someone has hurt or disappointed us in some way.

In our universe we are really good counters. But in this story that Jesus tells, counting is laid aside. Instead, there is no counting of sins. There is no list that is kept that someone has to overcome. Instead, there is free and unwarranted grace which is shown to this son who has blown it all but who returns and is welcomed home almost like a hero returning from a victorious war.

I recently heard a true story about a 31-year-old New York City social worker named Julio Diaz. Diaz customarily followed the same routine each evening by ending his hour-long subway commute to the Bronx one stop early, just so he could eat at his favorite diner. But one night, as Diaz stepped off the No. 6 train and onto a nearly empty platform, his evening took an unexpected turn.

He was walking toward the stairs when a teenage boy approached and pulled out a knife and asked for his money. So Diaz gave the boy his wallet. As his assailant began to walk away, Diaz said, "Hey, wait a minute. You forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people all night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm."

The young man looked at his victim like he was crazy, and asked, "Why are you doing this?" Diaz replied, "Well, if you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars, then I guess you must really need the money. I mean, all *I* wanted to do was get dinner... and if you want to join me... hey, you're more than welcome." Diaz said, "I just felt maybe he really [needed] help." Remarkably, the boy agreed, and the unlikely pair walked into the diner and sat in a booth.

Shortly the manager came by, the dishwasher came by, and the waiters came by to greet him. Diaz remembered, "The kid was like, 'You know everybody here. Do you own this place?' "No," Diaz replied, "I just eat here a lot."

The boy responded, "But you're even nice to the dishwasher." "Well, haven't you been taught that you should be nice to everybody?" Diaz asked him. "Yeah, but I didn't think people actually behaved that way," the boy said.

The social worker saw an opening. He asked the boy what he wanted out of life. "He just had almost a sad face," Diaz said. He couldn't answer--or he didn't want to. When the bill arrived, Diaz told the teen, "Look, I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill 'cause you have my money and I can't pay for it. But if you give me my wallet back, I'll gladly treat you."

The teen "didn't even think about it" and handed over the wallet, Diaz said. "So, I gave him \$20... I figured maybe it would help him...." But Diaz asked for something in return, and the boy gave it to him. The boy gave him his knife.

I want to challenge us to do something radical this week or in the coming weeks. I want you to think about the person that you have the most trouble with. Think about the person that you can't stand because they have wronged you in some way. It may be the sibling that ran off with the family inheritance and left your parents broke or left you without money that you planned to do some good with.

It may be a former friend that took advantage of you and took something from you that was not theirs to take. Maybe it was something that robbed you of something that you value. It could be something emotional. It could be something spiritual. It could be something tangible. Someone or something has taken something from you.

There are a couple of ways to respond to this act of injustice. You can try to get back at them. Defeat them. Rail against them in public. Lash out in some way. And you can do that. You can be the angry, self-righteous oldest brother in the parable that we read. Whenever you are wronged, you have every right to try to punish the person who has hurt you or something you love. You have every right to withhold affection from the one who has taken something from you.

But there is another way that Jesus has shown us in this parable that he has told. Instead of seeing the person as the enemy to be defeated, what would happen if you gave them a dinner in their honor? Can you imagine what might happen? Can you imagine how freaked out they would be? You could really play with their mind.

In fact, I challenge each of you to throw a party in honor of someone that you don't trust. For instance, what if our church issued a real invitation to the Muslim community at Islamaville and said, "We invite you over to our place for dinner and we are going to give you some type of honor?"

Or, if you live in a wealthy neighborhood, what if you invited your church neighbors to gather together and invite to your home people from a neighborhood that is economically very different than yours and said that you are going to honor them in some way? Not to show off your stuff but to show hospitality.

Or, if you are a parent and your young adult child has gone off in a direction which is very different than the way you wanted your child to live their life, what if you invited your child and their friends to your home and said, "Welcome, I want to honor all in you that I really appreciate."

Or what if, oh this is really stepping on toes, what if you and your friends who are Republican or Democrats got together and you had a party in which you invited people who were politically different than you and you had them over to your house for dinner in order to honor them?

What if, instead of inviting your friends to go out and eat, you invited someone that you don't particularly like or someone that you just can't understand? Of course, if I get a bunch of lunch invitations this week I am going to wonder about some stuff. What if we as a church teamed up and decided among ourselves that we are going to fix a meal together and invite people that we want to honor that may not deserve to be honored? A group of people that would not set foot in this church otherwise than by personal invitation.

The purpose of offering hospitality dinners is not to make ourselves look good or to bring attention to ourselves or to prove ourselves correct. The purpose of any of these dinners would be to honor our guests. Guests who may have done something we totally disagree with. Guests who may live a lifestyle which is completely opposite of what we believe in. Guests who may have disappointed us deep within our souls. Guests who deserve no grace whatsoever.

Now that I think about it. This may not be a very good idea after all. Because if we really show hospitality to people who we think deserve no grace then we may just open ourselves up to grace. We may find out that the people that we think of as “them” aren’t really all that different. We may find sympathy and care in our hearts for people we don’t like. This, of course, will complicate our black and white world where there are deserving people and undeserving people.

It’s a lot less complicated if we just close our Bible and ignore this silly little story that Jesus tells. After all. It’s just a parable. It didn’t really happen. Except, maybe it did happen in that subway station in the Bronx with that kid who was robbing that social worker. Except, maybe this story could happen if you gave a dinner party for people who are different than you.

Who are you inviting to your next party? AMEN.

-Story at end from NPR’s *Morning Edition*, March 28, 2008, as reported by *Michael Garofalo* and found in sermon on Day 1 by Rev. Bob Dunham, March 14, 2010 and found at http://day1.org/1759-which_comes_first_grace_or_repentance

-Idea for “other country that doesn’t count” is from David Lose, Working Preacher site, found at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=320

-Text: Luke 15:11-32

-Given: March 14, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Call to Reconciliation

We know our faults -- the way we have treated others, our alienation from God, our unwillingness to be faithful people. We will not hide our sin or remain silent, but confess them to the One who surrounds us with steadfast love. Please join me as we pray silently and then spoken,

Unison Prayer of Confession

On this very day, Waiting God, we admit all the lengths to which we go so we might avoid you. You offer us that kingdom of joy and wonder, yet we would hide in places where temptation waits. You invite us to feast on your grace and peace, but we stubbornly refuse, because you also welcome those we call 'outsiders.' We are quick to see all the mistakes that those around us make, but hope you will ignore our foolish choices.

Holy God,
you are not our accountant,
but our lover;
you are not angry at us,
but you forgive us;
you are not our enemy,
but the One who runs towards us
with wide open arms,
throwing steaks or veggie burgers on the grill
to celebrate our newness!

Jesus Christ,
you travel to that distant country called our sin
to bring us home once again;
you share your inheritance with us
so we might be blessed;
you know the famine of our spirits
and fill it with your hope.

Holy Spirit,
surrounded by your grace,
we offer glad cries of salvation;
encircled by your constant love,
we shout for joy;
enclosed in your comforting arms,
nothing can overwhelm us.

God in Community, Holy in One, from now on we will remember our life in you,