

Prodigal Pleasure

March 18, 2007

“Pleasure without Conscience”

Rev. Broadbent:

I appreciate having the whole story to work from this time. And it is a familiar story, even for the most biblically literate among us, if pressed, we could probably name this story among Jesus' stories.

But there are some things in the Bible that do not necessarily belong there. One of them is verse numbers – not part of the original text. Some folks will claim, “Oh, I have a red letter edition.” The original edition did not have red letters in it.

And story titles or section titles. There is no title to this story in the original Greek text of the New Testament. And yet there is a debate among scholars about what should be the most appropriate title for this story.

It is known most commonly as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” But some scholars would suggest that it should be named the “Parable of the Lost Son,” because it follows two other parables about lost items and lost sheep and a lost coin. It would seem fitting that the third of those three would be about the lost son.

Others have suggested that it is really a story about two sons, and it should be called something like “The Parable of the Prodigal and his Brother,” which is the title in my particular edition.

But the story begins this way. There was a man who had two sons. Maybe the name of this story should be, “The Parable of the Loving Father.” Or even to take a step further and this is my suggestion, “The Parable of the Prodigal Father,” with prodigal meaning wasteful – the parable of the father who gave his love wastefully.

Speaking of titles, this is one of those times when I am not entirely satisfied with the title of my sermon. Of course, I had to come up with it in the middle of January. But it does bring together this story and the theme given to us by Gandhi, namely confessing the sin of “Pleasure without Conscience”.

One of my guides in considering this issue is the Reverend Robin Meyers, who is a UCC pastor in Oklahoma City who attends services just about every summer here at First Congregational at Colorado Springs. He wrote this great book that could be the theme of a whole entire Lenten season called, *The Virtue in the Vice* – finding seven lively virtues in the seven deadly sins.

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In his chapter on the deadly sin of lust, he suggests an alternative, but not before attempting to confess the sin of the church, which has been to separate body from spirit. Meyers writes, “The Apostle Paul confessed that he might not have lusted so often if he had not heard again and again, ‘Do not lust. Do not lust.’”

So what has the church offered us as the deadly sin of lust? The cardinal virtue of chastity. Where does that leave most of us? It leaves us out. What’s more is that it perpetuates a sexual schizophrenia that has marked the church’s teaching from the beginning. The mantra of the church became that sex was an obstacle to the life of faith, never a conduit.

We drag our bodies through life like a ball and chain, and then we learn to loath the very flesh, which that same church claimed worthy to bear the incarnation. If the word became flesh, then surely the flesh is not our enemy.

We have done a terrible job of helping people live comfortably inside their own skin. Instead of talking about a healthy sexual trinity, where human beings are body and spirit animated by soul. We have instead preached sexual dualism.

These sermons take many forms, but the thesis is always the same – spirit good; body bad. How many of you have heard a sermon like that before? I will try to make this sermon not like that.

The story of the loving father is a story, I think, about pleasure. In each of the three characters’ lives, there is a particular approach to pleasure. And the details of the story are very important. The younger son, in asking for his inheritance, is essentially saying to his father, “You are as good as dead to me.” The practice at the time was for the father to set up his inheritance and then it would be given when he dies. So to demand it while the father is still living is to say, “Father, you are as good as dead to me.”

The younger son gathers all that he had and travels to a distant country. The text then says, “There he squandered his property in dissolute living.” To a distant country he has taken everything that belonged to him in his father’s house. He has left his father’s house and has even left the country. He has gone so far away that he has really revoked all of his status, all of his renown, even his own nationality.

“And there he squanders his property in dissolute living.” Images might be springing up in your head. We do not know specifically what they are. We do know that they were such that he did not have any money left. His older brother later on interprets what that might mean, saying that he spent his money on women or, in some translations, prostitutes. But the text does not say that at this point.

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Then a famine strikes, and he has nothing. He has found a job feeding pigs. But no one would give him even the pods of the pigs to eat. This is the last revocation of any of his status. As an Israelite, to work with a pig would be beyond the lowest form of work. Pigs, as cute as we might think they are, were considered the dirtiest among all of the animals. It is the final gesture of him having nothing left, no self-respect.

When he comes to his senses, we might think, “Oh, well, when you reach that bottom, then you kind of turn around, your heart turns.” But if you read carefully, that is really not what is happening. He is, in fact, still looking after his own self-interest.

He is scheming. “I know what I will do.” You can hear the little scheming in his voice. “I’ll go to my father, and I’ll say, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and I have affronted you. Please take me on as one of your hired hands.’”

Well, he sets off to do just that. Then we have this wonderful and very beautiful detail of the story, which is that the father runs out to meet him. This is not a normal thing for a well off, land-owning, distinguished, honorable man to do. In fact, in and of itself, in that act, he is giving up some of his honor. He is being vulnerable. I cannot describe it any better than to just do it for you. It would look something like this [sounds of Rev. Broadbent running up the aisle]. “I’m so glad you’re home!!!”

Now, just as you are feeling a little bit comfortable that your otherwise staid preacher just bounded off the chancel and ran up the aisle, maybe that will give you just a little flavor of what it might have looked like to the neighbors, this man in his elegant robe, who is such a distinguished and upstanding citizen, to debase himself in this way, to go greet his reckless, or clueless, son, and to embrace him.

The son does say to him, “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and before you.” Maybe he said it with a slightly different tone, having now experienced what that kind of welcome would have been.

The father says to his servants, “Quick, fetch a robe and a ring and sandals.” He is restoring the son’s status. Without asking any questions, the father restores his son’s status with those symbols. “Kill the fatted calf and let us celebrate. For the son was lost and is found. He was dead and is now alive.”

The story does not end there, as Ben pointed out. There is another son. It is interesting if you search your own heart and ask, “Who of these characters do I mostly easily associate myself with?” Well, the elder son is out in the field. He is working like a good son is supposed to be, and he hears music and dancing.

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The party has already started. He asks a servant what has happened, and the servant says, “Well, you know that brother of yours who took his inheritance and went and wasted it, he is back. And this is the result.”

Well, he was furious, as you can probably sympathize. He goes to his father and says, “You know, I’ve been working for you like a slave for all these years. You may or may not have noticed, but I have never, ever disobeyed one of your commands. And yet in all this time, you never even gave me a kid goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But now, this son of yours, who was doing who knows what, wasting his money on prostitutes, for him, you kill the fatted calf.”

The other beautiful detail of the story is that the father goes out to that son. And in another act of self-deprecation, of daring and vulnerability, pleads with him and says to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found.” He does not tell his son “to get over it.” He tells his son, “I love you, and everything I have is yours.”

These two sons represent what may still be for us a model of response to desire and pleasure. The younger son, knowing what he wants and not willing to wait around for it or to set any boundaries, demands his inheritance and goes and wastes it. Just like that.

But the older son thinks that the only way to live is just to work and to mind your manners and to follow all the rules. There will be no fun for now. I’m going to save my inheritance.

And the father, perhaps, provides for us an intermediary between these two, a way of God reaching out to those extremes that we are so beholden to and creating an intimate center that is both daringly playful but also that includes a wholesome discipline.

In Robin Meyers words, “The alternative to the deadly sin of lust is the lively virtue of holy Eros. Eros, the root of the word erotic. “Holy Eros,” Meyers writes, “is reciprocal and without shame. Just as lovers in the biblical book *The Song of Solomon* desire one another.”

God longs for the redemption of creation. Desire is not inherently evil, unless it is inherently selfish. Desire is not inherently evil, unless it is inherently selfish. Granted the word erotic is a fallen angel in our time. It has come to refer to sexual acts, even to the lowest kind of sex, and is a popular name for adult bookstores and video arcades. But, in classical literature, it was Eros, a highly spiritual, cosmic, and lofty kind of love.

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In Greek literature, Eros was the magnetism that held the universe together. And human love merely drew from this ocean of cosmic desire. Plato said of lovers that “the deepest insights spring from their love.” Socrates refers to himself as a lover. Carl Jung said, “People think that Eros is sex. But not at all. Eros is relatedness.”

So when we think about pleasure, when we think about desire, we are thinking about, we are praying on relationship. And yet there is a huge wound that we must attend to. Here is the wound. Say it to yourself. You can even say out loud. “I want to experience pleasure.”

[Congregation responds]

Feel it? Feel it? That is awkward to say in church. It is awkward to say in church, but that is the split we have made. This split between body and spirit, which is manifest in our discomfort around admitting that we are human. I mean, the behaviorists, who are not even religious, would say, “Humans want to experience pleasure and avoid pain.” It is a basic reality to our very existence, and yet we make this separation – separating being the opposite of relation – in our minds and in our souls. But the father, who is our father, who is our mother, is the one who runs out to greet us. Whether we have been in the distant country making bad decisions with no boundaries and separating ourselves from relationship in that way or whether we are the ones who play by all the rules, stay in the field, have no fun, and impose so many restrictions on ourselves that we can never admit it is okay to experience pleasure.

Why is it that in seeking pleasure we harm ourselves and others? Huge, huge rift in our own lives, in our culture, and in our church. And where for you is that wound the most open? Where for you is that relationship the most broken? Are you in the field; and you need the father, the mother, to come out and plead with you? For she is ready. Or are you coming back from that distant country, and there is the father running to greet you.

Amen.