

Into the Mystery - MET 3-21-10

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³So he told them this parable:

¹¹ "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us

eat and celebrate;²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.²⁷ He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.²⁹ But he answered his father, '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.³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹ Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.³² 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.'"

Can't you just picture the scene: brokenhearted father can't help but wait, look, and hope each day that his son will return. One day, finally, in the distance he can just make out a form. This father just knows it is his long, lost son and so he drops everything and instead of waiting to hear what the son has to say; instead of folding his arms over his chest; this father runs to his son, throws his arms around him and kisses him.

Colleen and I were talking the other day and she told me she has a friend who lived this story. Her brother ran away from home. Not like happened in my family. My brother only made it to the end of the block and decided to turn back. This brother ran away and stayed away for years. One day she saw someone walking up the way - a scruffy man with long hair and a beard. She wondered who on earth this stranger was, meanwhile, her mother, who was farther off than she recognized this person in an instant, dropped everything and ran and put her arms around this scruffy character welcoming home the runaway son.

Australian minister, William Loader shares a **A bent tale about a dog** that expresses this kind of extravagant, no holds barred kind of love and welcome. He writes, "Dogs know. In a moment she was off, tail high and wagging its crooked shape vigorously as she bounded down the path. Moments before all was still, just a twitch of the nose scenting the air. Six months back it was different. Shouting, slammed doors, curses, a kick and then a yelp. He was gone, bag in hand. And

she was cringing in pain by the step. It was lucky the tail had not snapped right off. She was badly bruised. He had gone, nobody knew where. Off to make his fortune, anything but home, anyone but family, and away from that damn' dog. It's just that jobs weren't easy to come by. Streets are not friendly. Parks are sometimes cold. Down he went, caught in the spiral, used, abused; promise and hope turned to hopelessness and despair. There was nothing left: back home! Give it a go again.

And she saw him coming afar off, caught his scent. Now nothing was stopping her. She bowled him over with one great leap of love. She wee-ed in ecstasy just to see him. As she licked him with affection, he broke down and wept. Nothing more needed to be said. Barking enthusiasm, she announced the homecoming, annoyed brother from the cricket on TV to get up and see, jumped up and licked him too - and fetched the ball. She knew. God knows dogs know.

Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son, or as some would rather call it, the Forgiving Father, is all about extravagant love and grace given freely to the undeserved. This story illustrates so well the various themes we have been hearing about during Lent. This younger son certainly got himself lost. Jesus knew his audience very well. It doesn't get much lower than a son asking for his inheritance while his father is still alive. It's kind of like saying, "I wish you were dead." You would expect the father to refuse the request, it is truly unreasonable. And it's not just disrespectful of the father. In order for the father to give this younger son his inheritance, he would have had to sell some of the ancestral property which is an insult to those who came before you. This father risked his own reputation within the community in order to grant his son's request.

So the son gets what he thinks he wants, leaves home and family, and squanders everything his family and his father have worked for and held dear on what the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates "dissolute" living. King James says, "riotous" living. We get

the picture. This guy is truly lost! He was a disgrace, not only to himself, but to his family as well. And, as happens eventually when a person is that lost, he hits the bottom, literally. Here you have a Jewish man nose to nose with the pigs. Moses was clear that swine are not kosher. No good Palestinian Jew would be caught dead near pigs, yet here he was right in the muck with them. What was he doing? There, wallowing among the pigs, this scoundrel son "came to himself." At that moment this younger son decided he could not go on living as he had been. He decided to surrender. He decided to return home, not as a son, but as a farmhand. For he knew he had lost his place in the family, but maybe he could work for them. And so he headed back, practicing the speech he would give to his father upon his return.

But something happened that was totally unexpected. His father pre-empted his speech by running to meet him on the road and hug him and kiss him and give him a royal welcome with a robe and a ring and sandals, and a feast. What a joyous day! The lost has been found; the dead restored to life. Now you understand, by all rights, he should

have been disowned. But this father, despite conventional wisdom, was reckless with his love and joy upon his son's return.

Jesus could have ended the story with the celebration. But he doesn't. You see, there is more than one way to be lost. Some, like the younger son, are lost in reckless living, in squandering our inheritance, in embarrassing the family name, in cutting off relationship, in making a total mess of our lives. But there is another form of lostness that Jesus wants to point out. If you'll recall, Jesus tells this story because he has been questioned by the religious leaders because of the company he kept. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus has to add this last bit about the elder son for their benefit.

The elder son is not glad to see his lost brother return. The elder son is angry with his father killing the fatted calf in celebration of his return. And the older brother is grumbling and bitter. "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never thrown me a feast! Yet this "son of yours" comes back and you fill the fatted calf for him!"

This elder son may not have squandered his inheritance in reckless living, but he has squandered another part of inheritance, like values and qualities of his father. This brother, who has enjoyed first son status (which means he stands to inherit the lion's share of his father's estate when he dies), who has continued to have a relationship and security and benefits his brother had long since been without, has squandered and trampled his father's love and generosity. This brother, instead of being grateful and emulating his father's compassion and good will is lost in bitterness and pride and a sense of entitlement. Yet, this forgiving father comes to him as well, offering him a place at the table and kind words. "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." This father has enough love and grace to meet each one in their own state of lostness and offer them love and grace, welcome, and a vision of the kind of character and attitude that

brings life and joy. We don't know if the elder brother could accept the father's grace or not.

There is a Sufi story that illustrates the nature of the father in this story. "Once upon a time, a Sufi stopped by a flooding riverbed to rest. The rising waters licked the low-hanging branches of trees that lined the creek. And there, on one of them, a scorpion straggled to avoid the rising stream. Aware that the scorpion would drown soon if not brought to dry land, the Sufi stretched along the branch and reached out his hand time after time to touch the stranded scorpion that stung him over and over again. But still the scorpion kept its grip on the branch. "Sufi," said a passerby, "Don't you realize that if you touch that scorpion it will sting you?" And the Sufi replied as he reached out for the scorpion one more time, "Ah, so it is, my friend. But just because it is the scorpion's nature to sting does not mean that I should abandon my nature to save."

Jesus' parable is not so much about the sons as it is about the nature of the forgiving father who is reckless and lavish with love and

grace. When we finally surrender ourselves to God, we are met with that very love and grace that takes us as we are and changes us into more of what we can be... more God-like. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes: "I have a dream, God says. Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family." Pray we may meet God and be filled with gratitude because of God's amazing grace for all. Amen.