

Lent 4c
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
March 14, 2010

Leo Tolstoy said that “happy families are all alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Maybe that is true, but I look at it another way. I think every family is both happy *and* unhappy, each in its own way. Families are complex organic systems, held together by powerful forces of love, need, the desire for connection, and the struggle for independence. They are fueled by rivalry, passion, tension, familiarity, companionship, misery and joy.

Biblical families are no exception. The very first family in scripture is shattered when Cain murders his brother Abel. In the Bible, families struggle with infertility, infidelity, sibling rivalry, and parent-child conflicts. Abraham carries his only son up Mount Moriah to sacrifice him. Rebecca helps her son Jacob steal his brother’s birthright. Joseph’s brothers throw him down a well and sell him to slave traders. David weeps over the corpse of his rebellious son Absalom. In the Bible, mothers plot, sisters mock, brothers battle, and fathers rage.

And yet, a family is the means by which grace and divinity, redemption and restoration enter our world. Jesus, the very Son of God, was born into a family -- with a mother and a father, with brothers and sisters. As the Eucharistic prayer says, he shared our human nature ... well, he probably also had to share his toys. Jesus knew his share of family conflict. We find it in scripture, as he snipes at his mother at the Cana wedding, or later when he tells his worried mother and brothers to shove off and go home, because – as he gestures widely at the disciples – “here are my mother and my brothers!”

Nonetheless, on Good Friday his mother stood by him, faithfully grieving at the foot of the cross. And just a few years later, his brother James was leading the first group of Christians in Jerusalem. Yes, when Jesus tells these wonderful, intense little parables about families, he knows what he's talking about. He knows because he has lived it, happy and unhappy, functional and dysfunctional, just as we have.

And today in our reading, we hear once more the parable of this intense little family unit ... the forgiving father, the returning son, and the resentful son. Or you might call them the foolish father, the disobedient son and the dutiful son. Or the enabling father, the acting-out son and the co-dependent son. However you want to consider these three, it is in this story, in this triangle, in this emotional web of loss and restoration, of repentance and reconciliation, of resentment and reassurance that Jesus says we learn something very important about God and about our selves.

What we learn out of this parable is this: the journey we are all on, this spiritual journey, to become Christ's New Creation, to carry out his work of reconciliation in the world, as the apostle Paul puts it – this work begins in our own families. This work begins at home.

Reconciliation, repentance, forgiveness -- all begin at home. If we can't learn it there, if we can't practice it there, if we can't find it there, it's going to be very difficult to find it in any of our other relationships. If we can't somehow let go of the past, learn to forgive our parents, forgive our siblings, forgive our children, we aren't going to make much progress forgiving anyone else.

And yet, if we dive into the dynamics of the family in today's lesson, we might find ourselves in deep water. Because to spend any time at all with the Prodigal Son and his brother and father, is to begin to start to think about our own families. Our parents and all the ways they might have failed us. Our own brothers and sisters, and the competition, the jealousy, the relationships that can harden into something stiff and uncomfortable as we age.

It gets us thinking about our children, how they might end up – if they are not grown – or how they *have* ended up, if they are. Most of all, it gets us thinking about ourselves, about all the times we’ve been an enabling pushover, like the father, or a heedless rebel like the younger son, or a resentful martyr like the older son.

And then voices from our own past start to speak to us, scenes unfold before our eyes, emotions bubble up that we thought we had safely stuffed down into some deep, dark corner of memory, never to be heard from again. Can’t you hear them whispering in the corners of your mind?

“Mom always liked you best.” “Can’t the two of you just get along?” “Why doesn’t your son come home any more?” “Is your daughter still living in your basement?” “I can never forgive him for the way he treated our parents.” “I can’t stand to have my sister visit.” “My father was the meanest SOB who ever lived.” “She got two weddings and six years of college paid for, and I got nothing.” “Get out. Just get out. You’re no child of mine.”

How can forgiveness be possible, how can reconciliation be possible, we may wonder ... given all that has gone before? All the old hurts. All the old injuries. We look at this parable, at the son straggling up the road, the father racing to meet him, and we wonder ... how can you let it all go? How can you just set everything that has happened between you aside?

And we end up standing out there on the porch with the elder brother. The elder brother is no fool, you know. He sees all the reasons not to forgive his wasteful, wanton sibling. He knows that reconciliation is not always as easy as running down the road with a robe and a ring shouting, “Come on home, all is forgiven.” And yet, unless we can somehow move beyond the elder brother, unless we can get off that porch where we are stuck, we will never get to the good part, to the party part, to the rejoicing part.

How do we get there? I wish I could tell you. Every person is different, every family is different, and we are all broken in a thousand different ways. But what I can tell you is that it is possible, and that by the grace of God, people can change, people can forgive, and families can move forward.

And this is how I know it can happen. There is an Episcopal priest named Vaughan Booker. Thirty years ago, before he was a priest, he killed his wife with a hunting bow in a fit of rage when he found her with another man. He went to prison. He found God ... some people do. He was ordained a deacon while still in prison, then worked in business after he got out. But the call to serve did not fade, and over time, Booker proved that he had changed, that he was called by God to ordained ministry, and he was ordained a priest in the Episcopal church.

Seventeen years ago, Booker was freshly ordained and freshly the author of a book about his journey called "From Prison to Pulpit: My Road to Redemption." And he came to speak at the church where I was worshipping, to tell his story, how he went from murderer to priest.

I had read his story, and I wasn't sure what to think. Can you really change, that much? Can you go from being a person so fearfully jealous that you would kill a woman first and ask questions later, to being a person who is not only forgiven, but ordained to a position of trust and responsibility? I looked at Father Booker's face across the room as he spoke to us, and I wondered, and I hesitated, and I judged.

And then it hit me, like a ton of bricks. I had to believe that Vaughan Booker could change, because I had seen my father change. My father did not kill my mother, but he could have. My father could be a jealous and angry man, and when he got jealous and got angry, he got very, very dangerous. My father could easily -- given the same set of circumstances -- have done the same thing Vaughan Booker had done.

But my father did not do what Vaughan Booker did. By the grace of God he got beat up instead. He was mugged in front of our local grocery store one night, beaten so badly he was out of work for six weeks. And during those six weeks, he examined his life, and he committed to doing the counseling and the change that he would have to do to deserve my mother's love and to be a better man. And he changed.

And that night, as I looked at that murdering priest, I realized that every week when I said the creed and made confession and took communion, I proclaimed a gospel of forgiveness, a gospel of redemption, a gospel of grace that could change people's lives. And that if I really believed this, if I really believe this gospel of Jesus Christ is true, then I had to believe that Vaughan Booker could change. Because I knew that my father had changed.

In that moment, as I accepted Vaughan Booker's story of redemption as true, I also forgave my prodigal father. I got off the porch, that hard-earned porch of resentment and pain and fear and stubbornness, and I walked through the door, into the singing, dancing festival of reconciliation. And I am glad I did, because I had ten more years to freely love my father before he died.

That's my story. You may have one too. Maybe it's a struggle to get past some very real ghosts that have been haunting you since childhood. Or maybe you're on a journey right now to set things right in your own home, among the people you live and eat and sleep and fight with.

But remember. That's where reconciliation begins -- at home. Home where your family is. Home where your memories are. Home, where God's got a party going on that you don't want to miss.