

4th Sunday of Lent

Sermon 3.6.16

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A couple weeks ago, waiting in line at the Denver airport prior to our evening flight, we Goodmans overheard a man on his phone. He was right behind us, so we couldn't help but hear him; and it was crowded there, lined-up as we all were, tightly packed, maybe a hundred of us, maybe more, to pass through security.

It was a good time to practice a custody of the eyes. A careful not seeing what you don't want to see and what others don't want of themselves to be seen: the anxiety of that one traveler, the fight that couple was clearly in, the annoyance of that teenager at her embarrassing mother and dorky father: custody of the eyes.

Custody of the ears is a more difficult art. When it comes to hearing, there's no equivalent to looking down or away.

There was no not hearing this conversation.

The one side of it revealed a lot.

The man was in sales, and he was wearing his company shirt, the name of which though I didn't see. (Custody of the eyes.) He was talking to someone else whom it seems was also in sales and was in some place away from home. The person on the other end of the line had had a hard day, and the man nearby was bucking him up. "Get a bottle of something," he advised, "and a woman, one of those nurses, and head up to your room. You'll feel better tomorrow."

Jesse laughed lightly at the advice, I have no idea what the boys made of it, and my thought, which I said, though softly, was, "That would make me feel so much worse."

Transgressive behavior isn't always such a thrill. Sometimes it's downright depressing.

It took me a long time to realize the so-called prodigal son hadn't necessarily "gotten away" with something. The dissolute living, as it's first called in the story; the devouring of his father's property with prostitutes, as the older son calls it when his wayward brother has returned: it took me a long time, many years, to recognize that the younger son hadn't "gotten off lightly." Though the father said as much to his older son—"You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours"—I still assumed the younger son made out while the older son was just a sucker.

You know the story, or you likely do. Actually, even if you know nothing else of the Bible, you probably know this story (along with the so-called “Good Samaritan”). This one, Luke notes, Jesus told when some Pharisees and scribes were grumbling, saying of Jesus, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Those sinners, and more specifically tax collectors, had been coming to Jesus and “listening to him,” so they likely heard this story that Jesus would tell and perhaps recognized “where they were in the story,” and maybe even heard the Pharisees and scribes cast their aspersions in the first place: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

It’s also likely those aspersions wouldn’t have come as much of a surprise. The tax collectors, the sinners of whom these upright citizens spoke, were likely deserving of aspersion. Tax collectors practiced extortion as often as they simply collected taxes. They took more than was due, threatening violence if the trumped up total wasn’t paid—and though we can’t know whether or not they consider themselves a bad sort (few people actually think of themselves as villains; most people actually think of themselves as good, or good enough), we can suppose they knew the likes of the Pharisees would have considered them bad. (I mean, would it come as a surprise to Quentin Tarrantino that a small-town church pastor takes issue with his violent movies? Sometimes you just find yourself playing to type.)

So all of this is highly typical: the Pharisees hate the tax collectors, and say as much; and the tax collectors are bad, but not *really* bad, just trying to find some advantage in a lousy situation. Same as it ever was.

What would have been a surprise was Jesus’ keeping company with tax collectors—Jesus, who seemed to have some authority about him, and who knew his Bible and could quote the prophets and spoke of the kingdom of heaven and seemed intimate with God. All these things, yet he so thoughtlessly hung out with the worst of society, those who exploit the righteous, who take advantage to a criminal degree.

Surprising? It’s shocking!

But not to us, right? This isn’t such a surprise, to say nothing of a shock, to us. Even if we know nothing else of the Bible, we know that Jesus had a soft spot for the wrong sorts of people—or, to put it in more a preacherly way, we know that Jesus came not to heal the well but the sick. We know, and are entirely comfortable with the assurance (this which we find assuring), that Jesus came not to gather in those already gathered in but those who’d wandered off. In fact, just

prior to his telling this story about the wayward son, he spoke of a lost coin whose poor owner stayed up all night looking for it; and then a lost sheep whose absence was more pressing to the owner than the presence of the other ninety-nine still in the fold. And now there was this, a younger son who'd traveled to distant country and whose coming home some time later was apparent cause for greater celebration than the continued presence of the one who'd never left.

And it's fine, right? This is good; we're good with this, right?

Or are we?

Because it's one thing when the concern is for a lost coin: that's not going to hurt the feelings of the coins that never got lost. And it's okay when the concern is for the lost sheep, though the absence of the shepherd does put those sheep yet in the fold at some risk. But when the concern is for the child, your brother, let's say (because we know where *you* are in this story, right? You're the good son who did his duty. After all, you're here in church this morning when you could be sleeping off a hangover or melting into your sofa to binge-watch *House of Cards*. But no): so, when the concern is your brother, whose waywardness cost him everything and cost your father half his household wealth and cost you some of your inheritance, now that your brother will be moving back in, it becomes problematic.

Thus the question: "Is the prodigal son sincere in his repentance?"

This David Lose asked on his blog—David Lose, a scriptural scholar and president of Luther Seminary: "Is the prodigal son sincere in his repentance?" He asked it having seen an artist's rendering of this story in which the wayward son now returned had what Lose considered a "sly look" on his face. (I haven't seen the painting so I don't know how I'd describe it.)

But let's be honest: a sly look makes sense. After all, his father had been played for the fool he apparently was. For starters, he'd given his younger son half of his property, this which the younger son had claimed "would belong to him." But this isn't necessarily so. In fact, it was much more common that any children other than the first-born son would receive nothing as an inheritance. The oldest son would typically inherit the whole estate, while the subsequent sons would be left to the mercy of their oldest brother or, barring any such mercy, left to their own devices. (As for daughters, of course, they'd be married off.)

But *even* if the subsequent sons *were* eventually to receive, there'd have been no expectation that they should do so prior to the death of the one from whom they were to inherit. You don't get your inheritance while the one leaving wealth to you is still alive. It's like the college fund I

knew my parents were building up for me. I remember, when I was in high school, wondering about what I might do with it if I decided not to go to college. But I didn't have to wonder for long. My parents made it clear that this wasn't money for *me*, it was money for *college*: if I didn't go to college, I didn't get the money. So it is with an inheritance: you don't cash in on it whenever you decide you could use that money; you receive it as a resource when the resource that was your parent's life is now lost.

But not so with this son, and not so with this father. "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me."

So he did.

That was easy.

Hence the artist's rendering of the wayward son as sly—sly when he left and sly when he returned.

But, you know, I don't agree with that interpretation. I *do* think the repentance was real, and here's why: because the story says so. It says right there: "But when he came to himself..."

Repentance comes to us from the Greek word *metanoia*, which is a concept that's largely lost in our language and so is one that, whenever it comes up, I always spend a lot of time trying to explain.

-noia is knowledge, and *meta-* is that which lies beyond and before, among or along with. So *metanoia*, that is, repentance, is a certain sort of knowledge, a grand sort of knowledge, knowledge of knowledge perhaps, or knowledge of the knower, knowledge of *God*, which is to say knowing God but also knowing as God knows.

To repent, then, is to bring your partial and particular way of perceiving and thinking and judging and understanding to God's omni-partial and holistic way of perceiving and thinking and judging and understanding.

Or try this, another way of hearing *metanoia*, in contrast to paranoia, which is knowledge divided from itself, knowledge even adversarial to itself. Paranoia is when you're quite literally out of your mind—when what you think you know is coming from outside yourself, yet not from above but from beside, over your shoulder and just out of sight. It's threatening, even predatory; worst of all is has come to describe many people's understanding of God—that God is out to get you, that God means to punish you.

There's no shortage of paranoid religion out there. How about some metanoid religion?

I think *metanoia* is an answer to paranoia. I think *metanoia*—that is, repentance—might be heard to have some reconciling character, reconciling each of us with God, reconciling each of us with one another, reconciling each of us even to ourselves.

“When he came to himself...”

This is the event in the story that ultimately brings the wayward son back home. “But when he came to himself,” it explains, “he said, ‘...I will get up and go to my father and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against you...’”” And, yes, it’s an event that’s hardly recognizable as an event. “When he came to himself...” No one watching the wayward son would have seen something happen. Certainly the pigs that he’d been reduced to feeding (these unclean animals of which he’d have had no prior experience) had no realization that anything had just happened. Readers of the story even read right over it as if it’s but a transitional phrase, a bit of rhetoric that just makes the story flow better. Indeed, they *have* read right over it. But I think it’s *the* event of the story, really *the* event of every story. Has it ever happened to you? Have you ever been come to yourself, perhaps after time apart from yourself, split off from yourself even after days, months, years?

Having undergone such a thing, a coming to himself, the wayward son now had only to play out what had already happened: he went home, repentant and now ready to live.

Adam Phillips has a new book coming out. A psychoanalyst with a talent for presenting that body of knowledge for a general audience, his latest book is called *Unforbidden Pleasures*. Its central thesis is that, though we tend to be enthralled with the forbidden, we really get as much, if not more, pleasure from those things that aren’t forbidden. Forbidden pleasures, he argues, (according to the blurb on the Amazon website) “are the ones we tend to think about, yet when you look into it, it is probable that we get as much pleasure, if not more, from unforbidden pleasures than from those that are taboo.”

When I first heard about this book, I thought, I must read that prior to preaching on the so-called prodigal son. It sounds like it shares my thesis on that story. And I knew the prodigal son would be arriving soon in the lectionary calendar—it being a Lukan story and this being Luke’s year to lead us through the church cycle. I further figured it’d be sometime this summer that the story would arise, it being a parable and these tending to fall in the middle of the Pentecost. But then I noticed that it was *this week* when we’d hear this story, which meant I’d have to get the book on kindle and read it really fast. But when I tried that I saw the book wouldn’t be

released until early in the season of Pentecost. So I'm extrapolating here as to whether the book would have anything to say to the wayward son and moreover to the son who stayed home.

I hope it supports my thesis that sometimes the transgressive isn't such a thrill; no, that sometimes it's downright depressing. I hope this for the sake of my preaching to you, that what I say might be true. More than this, though, I hope it supports my thesis because then I won't seem like such a singular goody-goody.

Because the fact about me is that I do like honoring my commitments more than I think I'd like violating them. I enjoy my marriage much more than I believe I'd enjoy violating it. I enjoy keeping confidence with you, my parishioners, when you've needed such a thing from me; I enjoy that much more than I would enjoy spreading what I know as gossip. I enjoy my own imagination more than I would enjoy a drug-fueled state. And of the one time I lost myself at a party—I was eighteen and in the city—I can only thank God that the stranger, a man who picked me up and brought me back to where I was staying, was kind. I'll never do that to myself again, and I fear that I did it to myself even once.

So, maybe it's not just me. Maybe there is something here, that the unforbidden pleasures ought to excite us at least as much as what is forbidden. Maybe what pleasures we're not merely allowed but *encouraged* to indulge in—your favorite coffee every morning, a walk around the lake where you get to live, engaged in work that you find meaningful and important, ending the day with a glass of wine or a piece of carrot cake and a cat in your lap, rowing camp or fiddle camp or space camp or a quilting circle or whatever it is for you—are the things that should occupy our time and our joyful anticipation, not to mention our deep thanks.

I've said a couple times recently that I think wisdom dwells in knowing what time it is. Knowing what's appropriate to do at the time it is now—to act or to repose, to goof around or to get serious, to speak or to hold silence (after all, there is a time for every season under heaven): knowing what time it is: this is wisdom. But so is this: knowing what to desire, knowing what to want, going after as desirable the things that give life rather than wear it away, break it down.

It's tempting to think the so-called prodigal son learned this lesson the fun way. But maybe he learned it the hard way. Bedding down with a stranger whom you have to pay to touch you doesn't sound like fun. Doing that as a way of life sounds dreary in the extreme.

On the other hand, bedding down in a household peopled by someone—say, a father, for example—who loves you and relies you and provides everything you need and want: this sounds like heaven.

You know, maybe it is. So, I'm staking my life on that, and also not waiting. If that's the kingdom to come, I say we start living it now.

Thanks be to God.