

LIKE THAT
Sermon for Lent4C-Lk 15:1-3, 11b-32
LPC, 3/10/13

What do you do if you are an atheist and you've done something you feel really bad about?

Maybe you feel you never do anything bad. But that suggests personal dishonesty. Maybe you do bad things occasionally but you refuse to feel bad about them. Maybe you feel that feeling guilty is either purely a symptom of antiquated Victorian mores. This suggests amorality.

Maybe you have moral standards and feel bad for doing bad things for a little while, but you get over it. This isn't amorality, obviously, but it is potentially irresponsibility.

Perhaps you are responsible enough to believe that bad things must be made up and put right. But how about things that can't be undone?

Maybe you accept that when you hurt someone you should apologize, but what if the person you've wronged doesn't accept your apology? What happens to your guilt then? Or what if the person you've hurt is yourself? And you have trouble accepting your own apology to yourself?

Christianity teaches that God removes the guilt of those who repent. When all else fails, even if the person you've wronged can't forgive you, even if you can't forgive yourself, we believe that God forgives. Without this assurance I'm sure there are some of us who might feel too ashamed to even walk through that door, never mind receive food from the Lord's own table. But God forgives.

The parable of the so-called Prodigal Son, which we hear today, is a story about God's forgiveness. Many of us identify with the younger son. Perhaps we've experienced the kind of radical forgiveness that the father extends to his errant son in this story. Or perhaps we just rejoice to know that, if we should ever foul up as spectacularly as this kid, we can depend upon the loving forgiveness of our Father-God. What an incredible blessing! What a blessed assurance indeed!

Have you ever noticed that when Jesus tells a parable, he never actually tells us which character we're supposed to identify with? Part of the richness of Jesus' parables lies in putting oneself in the place of each character in turn. That is especially true in this parable. After we collapse with relief into the arms of the forgiving father as the younger son, it's often a profitable spiritual exercise to take the vantage of the other characters.

For example, consider the jealous older son. Have you been an egregious sinner or for most of your life have you been pretty good? If you've never killed someone,

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committed adultery or grand larceny, or squandered someone else's fortune, maybe the part of older son actually fits you better.

The context of the parable suggests that the older son reflects the attitudes of the Pharisees, who have objected to Jesus associating with notorious sinners. Understand that Pharisees were the keepers of religious standards. They were the ones who didn't want to see their culture go to hell in a hand-basket because some people were getting sloppy about what was good and right and just. They were the ones who, on their way to Temple, would notice which of their neighbor's camels were still in the driveway.

Get it? They were the righteous ones, the good guys of the day. Yet Jesus creates this older son character for their edification, because they begrudge Jesus' favors to the historically wicked, but repentant, folks, while they, who have always righteous, feel unrewarded by comparison.

I've said before that when Jesus talks to the disciples, he is talking to us. But when he speaks to the Pharisees, we should pay attention too. Because we are the religious people of our day, just as Pharisees were the religious people of theirs. Next time we're inclined to begrudge someone anything, we'd do well to remember the older son. Whom, by the way, the father also loved and treasured.

Speaking of the father, there's another character who invites identification. Since this character obviously stands for God in Jesus' parable, you may feel it's presumptuous and inappropriate to identify with him. I disagree.

On your bulletins this morning is a black-and-white reproduction of a sketch I made when I was on retreat last June. Here is the original, executed in oil crayons. It's no great work of art, but it shows something I haven't seen in other depictions of the Prodigal's Return.

Like Rembrandt, and like Heinz Warneke, who sculpted this subject for the National Cathedral, I show the son collapsed in shame before the father. He is hiding his face, showing that he no longer feels worthy to be called "Son." In no way do I think my rendition is remotely comparable, but I wanted to show the father coming down to the son's level, his own hands extended to cover his boy's to draw them away so he can gaze on that beloved face, restored to him at last.

Yes, God is like that.

You think you can't identify with God? Imagine this: The phone rings, you pick up. It's your teenager, with none of his usual bravado. He says, "Mom (or Dad), I'm so sorry – I wrecked the car." A thousand things go through your head but there are only four words you can possibly say: "Are you all right?"

Yes, God is like that.