

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Boston
Year C, Lent 4
March 27, 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

Isn't it really annoying when the wrong people come to hear Jesus?

Any junior-level PR person could tell you that it's terrible for advertising and marketing Jesus' message of love to have the wrong people as your first line of attendees.

I have no doubt that when they arrived, the tax collectors grabbed the best seats in the house even though they had never been there before, the ones where you had a good view of the preacher AND the other people in the crowds because half the fun of seeing a preacher is also seeing how others react to them.

I bet the sinners in the crowd arrived late too, making noise as they came close to Jesus, not heeding who they were disturbing with their entrance. I bet they opened their cellophane wrapped hard candies or drank their Dunkin' coffee while listening to the teaching-- munching and slurping and distracting the good people next to them. Maybe they even brought their children, who clearly don't know how to behave and lacked the proper manners for such a space.

Whatever the reality was of their behavior, we can all agree that if Jesus wanted to get himself out there, to get himself known and connected, to make the relationships which counted and would provide ample opportunities for meaningful networking, this was the wrong approach.

Luke tells us:

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The Pharisees and scribes had their eyes on the people who were in the crowd, scanning, assessing them and their worth. The sinners, the tax collectors though-- they had their eyes on Jesus.

We assume the moral to today's gospel immediately by way of its preface—the Pharisees are bad, and the tax collectors and sinners are helpless and hapless and therefore blessed by God who doesn't have the same thresholds as we might. And we can stay there in our judgment.

And perhaps there is another way.

Is it possible we can have a heart for both tax collector and Pharisee—one has been told they are worth nothing due to their jobs, and the other has been told their worth is entirely about their

jobs. Is it possible that Luke isn't telling a story *to* the tax collectors and Pharisees, but *about* the tax collectors and Pharisees?

Jesus presses this point with the famous (or infamous) Parable of the Prodigal Son: the story of a man with two sons, who choose differently- the elder who does what he thinks he should; and the younger who does what he wants, and ends up regretting his choices. When the father welcomes back the younger—runs out to meet him halfway, even—the older son is forgotten in the fields, coming home only to find that no one remembered to call him back. The father's response is to love both sons differently—to keep his promises to the eldest: 'you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours', he says to him—and to celebrate the return of the younger one—'this brother of yours was dead, and has come back to me; what was lost has been found.'

As an eldest child, an aspiring Type A, and a recovering perfectionist, I find equating the consistent obedience of the oldest and the self-interested repentance of the youngest to be unnerving and unfair (and I have more than once maturely stomped my foot to prove how unfair it is to my parents at every age).

But let's recall the Pharisees and the tax collectors listening to Jesus today-- pitting the older and younger brother against one another is misleading. Both brothers offer stories of pathos¹, and both characters have elements of right and wrong. One chose to leave, one was left out. In the same way that we tend to pit Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus, against one another inappropriately, this isn't a 'who is God's favorite' game—it is, instead, a portrait of the ways of fallible humanity and of the ways of God. Parables are not fables, nor morality stories-- as tempting as a 'grasshopper and ant' correlation might be this morning—they are surprising portraits of God which are meant to blow open the tidy endings we might naturally expect from them.

If you are worth your salt as a member of a congregation and a semi-frequent listener of sermons, or even a semi-regular taker of online BuzzFeed quizzes, you are going to be asking yourself who you are in this gospel. We all yearn to see ourselves in what is placed before us as a mirror.

And what God presents before us in the words of Jesus today are the two ways well-intentioned humanity is prone to wander from God's love, and from God's people—through resentment, like the older brother; and through shame, like the younger.

Resentment masked as responsibility. Shame masked as rebellious seeking.

The Gospel unmasks the sin behind the behavior today. And the Gospel tells us one thing: God embraces the holders of both resentment and shame—keeping the promises to one and meeting us halfway with open arms in the other.

Whether or not we are prepared to believe it though—whether or not we are willing to place our trust in a God who would respond in a foolish way towards wayward people—that is the journey we make in Lent, and that is the pilgrimage of the faithful throughout their lives. Trusting that

1 Cf Amy Jill Levine

God's love for us remains, regardless of where we stand, regardless of where we sit in church, regardless of if we are sinner or saint, regardless if our journey right now is straight and narrow and paved, or if we are barely making it through the craggy, disorienting wilderness.

We want to see ourselves with that same clarity we see the Good Older Responsible Son and the Prodigal—because at our hearts we want others to see us in that light as well. When folks cast their eyes over us in the congregation, over the board room table, over our desk, even over the dinner table, we want them to see us as good.

But God's gift to us is making us not good, but whole. We are not caricatures of people—God's people are never one adjective or the other—we are both and more. While the temptation is to sit and try to figure out 'who am I in this story?', it may be that we need to ask instead: 'What is God revealing to me in this story? Where is God surprising me? What makes me uncomfortable?'

It's annoying when the wrong people come to hear and seek out Jesus, isn't that right? It's annoying when they aren't the poster perfect people, the curated lives, the one-dimensional superlatives of a high school yearbook.

But here we are this morning, Church. Tax collectors and sinners, all of us. Pharisees and scribes, all of us. Responsible, resentful brother; seeking, shame-filled brother, all of us.

And if we let it happen, if we can trust that God works in ways not our own, our assurance is that God will love us and welcome us anyways.

And that means us, bringers of restless, noisy children; us eaters of loud, wrapped candies; us claimers of pews and Southie parking spaces; us mid-church checkers of email; us braggers of Wordle scores; us borrowers of others' assiduously transcribed class notes; us claimers of overhead airplane baggage space not our own. Us who are prone to wander. And us who are unwilling to shift an inch. We are terrible PR for the church.

And God is still running out to meet us here. And God is still running out to meet each of you here, and bring you home.

Amen.