

“A Long Story”

Sermon on Sunday, March 27, 2022

Dear church,

“This is a very long story,” we often say when someone asks us about complicated issues that involve many layers, multiple characters and events that go deep into the fabric of one’s own life. Why is it that my older sister and my older brother rarely talk to each other anymore? Why have they stopped communicating in any meaningful way? Well, that’s the case in my own family and I can tell you, both are nice people. So why? I don’t have an answer for that, only guesses and hypotheses; but I can tell you with a measure of certainty: it’s a long story, a story that goes all the way back to when they were young.

I also know that a number of people in our church are experiencing similar issues in their own expanded families, and if they ever felt comfortable enough to talk about it, they might say, “Oh, that’s a long story, ye know!” Usually those dramas include several of the following ingredients: hurt feelings, grudges, pride, misunderstanding, emotional reactivity, immature responses... the list of the ingredients gets long and longer the more you think about it. That’s why those stories tend to be complicated.

When God enters into the equation, when God approaches not only our individual lives but also our relationships, things may get a little bit simpler, less complicated, but not easier. And if you don’t believe me because you can’t possibly imagine how your complicated story could become less complicated - after all you know the people involved – I invite you to listen to the parable of the Lost Son, sometimes called “prodigal” son. It’s by far the longest of Jesus’ parables. Why is it so long? Because it is about one of those complicated stories and we don’t even get to hear the half of it! Imagine all the jealousies and rivalries that took place between the brothers which we don’t hear about. Or the broken relationship between father and son, the disappointment, the resentment. A book could have been written about the problematic relationships in this story. Jesus just gives us the basic plot of the drama of one complicated family, the relationships between the father and each of his two sons and the relationship between the older and younger heir, and that is complicated enough.

The boys are two very different characters. One is a risk taker, the other one plays it safe. One pushes the boundaries, the other one respects them. When the younger brother, the daredevil, goes all in and plays roulette with his inheritance, things come to a head. In most cases it would lead to a deep wound in the heart of the family. It would result in emotional outbursts, awkward silences and cancelled relationships. Most of us have seen that script play out somewhere in our network of family and friends. And most of us have felt quite helpless as observers. This stuff is so complicated and so delicate. What can you do?

When I broached the sore subject with my brother and sister-in-law last summer, there was a long, awkward silence, a silence that told me to be careful and not push it too far. The next day, my sister-in-law tried to explain the silence while also defending their position, which is what people often do. And you listen and try to understand without being able to solve anything of course. Why are people and relationships so complicated?

I promised you some easement from the gospel we heard today. The key person and the hero in this famous parable is the father who lets his son go when he wants to go, who doesn't try to find him son when he disappears, but who also never gives up on him. And when his son returns as a broken man, stigmatized by all the wrong choices he made, he welcomes him with open arms. If he had misgivings, which is quite likely, he doesn't show it. If he harbored anger and disappointment over the son's wasteful life style, he doesn't show it. He simply welcomes him with open arms as if he had returned from the dead, no strings attached. The most difficult things in life are the simple ones – simple love, simple acceptance, simple forgiveness. Not getting into all the complicated layers, not trying to untangle the knot of mistakes, not trying to be right, but love, acceptance, that's by far the easiest and most difficult path toward healing. It's what this father is able to do, thanks be to God.

The father has often been identified as God and the parable as a teaching story about God's grace and forgiveness. It's a good interpretation. But almost all of Jesus' parables are about the kingdom of God among us, and they encourage us to imitate the core teachings of that parable in the

messiness of our own lives and relationships. Welcoming someone who has hurt you with open arms is perhaps not quite as impossible as we thought. Perhaps it is in the realm of possibility, perhaps not. We will find out, but we shouldn't give up. For, as Jesus said at one point, "nothing is impossible for God," not even the miracle of healing a totally broken human relationship, not even breaking down a long and complicated story to its essential tenets and breaking through the crap. May God bring healing and love to the long stories in your life. Peace be with you!

Amen.