

Rejoice in Love

The Scripture Readings for this morning are two of the all time favorites of the New Testament. The story of the Prodigal Son is so often repeated that people who scarcely recognize that it is from the Gospels will refer to it. The story of the wayward child come home is so familiar in the non-church culture that it is almost as well known as the story of Cinderella. And the reading of First Corinthians 13 is used in weddings by people who have little or no relationship to any church. So in some ways, the story and the excerpt from Paul's letter to the Corinthians almost leaves us with nothing to say...but of course, I will say something.

Perhaps it is the very familiarity of these passages that necessitate a second, or third, look. What these two readings have in common is that they both grow out of conflict. The conflict in the story of the Prodigal is within the story itself. In the time of the original story, and even now, it is at least rude, and really a quite outlandish violation of the way things are done, to ask for your inheritance before the death of your parent. And Dad doesn't even go to the financially sound step of setting up a trust for the boy to prevent his son from spending down the principal. No, he goes ahead and violates custom and good sense and gives the boy his share of the estate, a portion of the family wealth, gives it all to the wastrel. The wastrel does of course what wastrels do, and spends it all.

It is only when the money is all gone that the young man comes to his senses and in desperation goes home, ready to eat whatever is left from what the livestock are fed. We always somehow assume that the story ends happily, Dad welcoming the boy home...but remember, the good son who stayed home was not happy. Father rejoices, the good son, not so much, wondering, "what's up with the rotten kid getting the fatted calf?" But the story of the overindulgent, forgiving father, the prodigal son, and the jealous brother is not a story about what is fair; it is a story about grace.

Rereading this story of homecoming this week, reminded me of the Robert Frost poem, "The Death of the Hired Man." This is a story poem about an elderly man, a transient by all reckoning, who turns up every year in time for haying. The farmer and his wife are discussing what's to be done with him this year, as he seems to be beyond any physical or mental capacity to build a load of hay. What's more, the old man has apparently been in the habit of walking off the job at the height of the season, when someone else offers him higher pay. The farmer makes the bitter complaint to his more sympathetic wife, that "home is where, when you go there, they have to take you in."

But his wife's definition is kinder, and the one that I prefer. Home, she says, is "Something you somehow haven't to deserve. Home then, is not obligation but grace.

Now to Corinthians: this letter, too, is a story of conflict. But this is not a conflict about established traditions of managing family wealth. This is about how a community will be made out of a group of people who have never been together in community before. This is conflict that grows out of the development of community among people

who come from different ethnic, and religious traditions, people who before being introduced to Jesus through the teaching of Paul would never have thought of being together. There is a struggle among them about whose traditions reflect the right way to be followers of Jesus, with many different points of contention; Should we make burnt offerings, and if we should, who gets to eat the lamb after it's roasted is one point of contention. At stake it seems, the question of who gets the self satisfaction of being the "rightest?" This is the question that leads us into the issue of rejoicing in wrongdoing.

As a friend and I talked about this passage this week, we talked about the categories of wrong doing. We came to the conclusion that Paul is not just thinking about how people might be glad that they didn't get caught for speeding, or taking the last cupcake when you are supposed to be watching your sugar intake. Not rejoicing in wrongdoing does mean that we make amends when we have violated someone's boundaries, or have broken any of the 10 commandments, even if we didn't get caught.

But rejoicing in wrongdoing has another social meaning in an emerging community. We rejoice in wrongdoing when we are glad that the person whose perspective we oppose, or whose personality we don't like makes a moral or tactical error, because their mistake make us and our position look better. We rejoice in wrongdoing when we are glad of that error whether our advantage is either something that helps us achieve a social goal, or if the mistake of the other makes us feel better about ourselves.

Paul reminds his community, that these are not things that should make us happy. What we should rejoice in is truth.

In our own time of loud claims of fake news and alternative facts, and Russian bots and Facebook memes, it is good to remember that the question, "What is truth? Is centuries old. We did not invent the question, nor the need to seek the answer.

It is also important to remember that in Christian community, we have a traditional answer to that question. The truth is Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John has Jesus say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" and has Jesus declare that those who keep to his teaching will "know the truth, and the truth set you free," free from sin, free from wrongdoing.

In our time of deliberately created confusion , it is vital that we who are followers of Christ remain committed to the truth, committed to the love of God in Christ, and the grace that we receive through Christ, and the love that, in grace, we are able to give to others. In this we may rejoice, that in Christ we have truth, and it is a truth by which we may measure other facts. We have the truth of the love of God in Christ as a guiding question with which to process information: how does this information here presented fit in with what I know about the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. How does this information fit with what is hopeful, what is redemptive, what is life giving? How does this information help me to live gracefully in our local community, and in the wider communities in which we live.

Paul reminds those argumentative Christians time and time again that knowing the truth is not a cause of boasting, because it is through grace, not our own accomplishment, that we have that knowledge. To know the truth of the love of God in Christ Jesus is not for boasting about, it is for rejoicing in, even in a sometimes dismal world. Knowing the truth gives us, not a big head, but a humble heart. In our rejoicing, through that grace, we may carry that truth of love and grace into our communities with us.

Please God, may this be so.