

Sermon: People are E-Strange-d

Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

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This parable is one of the most famous stories shared and heard by humanity across the ages. Many Christians understand it as a narrative expression of the heart of the Gospel and the Christian faith. There are many ways to interpret it and so much to glean from it that you just can't read and consider it too many times. Our Sunday Evening men's group which meets the first Sunday of each month is talking about parenting in their next session, April 3rd, and are being invited to read the parable again, expecting that they'll hear something new in this story regardless of how well they think they know it. I wonder if you heard anything new as Liz read it to you this morning?

Jesus doesn't have a title for the story, you know? Translators and Interpreters have labeled it the *Prodigal* Son suggesting that the story is about the wasteful, reckless, younger son who's eventually forgiven. But they've also called it the Lost Son emphasizing that it's about the younger son being not so much sinful but lost and eventually found. Others have called it the Lost Son referring to the older brother who shows up creepily and resentful at the very end, making many of us squirm. It's also been called the Parable of the Two Sons or the Parable of the Forgiving Father, for obvious reasons. Jesus doesn't name the story himself in good ole Jesus fashion, letting the chips fall where they may and for 2000 years they've fallen!

The title I'm choosing for today is the Parable of the Estranged Brothers, thanks to the theologian and pastor Rev. Paul Nuechterlein. Cause as I read the

parable again this week for the upteenth time, that's what stood out, that it's a story about estrangement and what a painful reality estrangement is in our lives. Could it be what all our pain revolves around? Which of course set me singing to myself – "People are strange, when you're a stranger, faces look ugly, when you're alone. Women seem wicked, when you're unwanted, streets are uneven when you are down... when you're strange, faces come out of the rain, when you're strange, no one remembers your name, when you're strange..." I'm sure that song came to your mind too?!

Estrangement. One of the many things that makes it so painful to witness what's going on in Ukraine is that they are family in many ways, aren't they, estranged siblings. And you know it's a central theme throughout the Old Testament, estrangement and specifically estranged brothers. Jesus is very aware of this when he tells his parable. When Adam and Eve fall in Genesis, the consequence is banishment or estrangement from the garden and the earth itself, having to toil with it to gain its harvest and then not only does Eve suffer at childbirth but her sons, the brothers Cain and Able become so estranged that one kills the other... and we are barely out of the first few pages of Genesis. Soon thereafter there's the story of Abraham who has Isaac and Ishmael, brothers who become estranged and many see the division between Jews, Christians, and Muslims traced back to this sibling estrangement. There's Jacob and Esau, right, when Jacob steals Esau's birthright from their father Isaac. There's Joseph and his brothers, Joseph who is loved most by his father and resented by his brothers especially when he receives the "technicolor dreamcoat" and that whole story of estrangement, rivalry, and violence. There's Moses and his brother Aaron who have their issues and tensions. There's David and his brothers when he as the

youngest becomes king to the chagrin of his brothers. Notice something in all these tensions and estrangements that it's the younger brother getting what the older brother typically gets and deserves, and the older brothers resenting that. The first shall be last and the last first, the least will be greatest... Jesus' words resonate all through and when Jesus tells this story all these other stories would be buzzing in the ears of his first century Jewish listeners, the estrangement of brothers at the heart of human suffering and how God works through those tensions to advance God's purposes.

Where is the motif of estrangement touching your life right now? I dare say there are none sitting here among us that are not touched if not racked by the experience of estrangement at some level or another. Jesus' parable is rife with it. The younger son becomes estranged from his family in pursuit of filling the empty void within him, took his inheritance and squandered it on profligate living. What are we running off to and neglecting or rejecting as a result? What are the addictions that create estrangement in our lives – drug, drink, pornography of course are prevalent addictions in our society that devastate relationships but all of us have addictions at some level or another if not those – addiction to work and busy-ness, addiction to food or even exercise, addiction to the esteem and affirmation of others, addiction to worry and stress. The nature of any addiction is that they cause us to be estranged from our true selves and damage relationship with others and God.

The older brother's estrangement is more subtle and as a result in a certain way more insidious in his resentful fulfilling of duty. We can become estranged from ourselves and others and our God in the very effort to do everything right and follow all the rules and be good people when that becomes a feeding of our

own egos that get all caught up in our efforts and we're shocked suddenly by the enemies we've made of those not appreciating or deferring to us or trying as hard as we are.

I don't know if you can find your sore, tender spot of estrangement in any of that? If you can't and if you dare ask a loved one how you tend to separate yourself from others and I bet they'll illuminate you, if they dare.

But there's another sore spot of estrangement that many of you are suffering with, that is in certain ways the underlying threat that feeds all of our fear of estrangement and that's the final human estrangement of death. As much as we talk about a person's spirit still being with us and their memories alive and assurances of peace in the afterlife, those of us who have had a dear one close to us die know the pain and reality of what estrangement feels like. It feels so final and so complete, this last estrangement. It's maybe why the father came running so eagerly to receive the younger son because though his leaving had been so harsh and disrespectful, all of that is nothing when he sees his son returning, walking down the road to him, when he thought the estrangement had been forever. And when he's trying speak to the heart of the older brother, the father says just this – "your brother was dead but now he's alive, he was lost but now he's found! We had to celebrate and rejoice!" And I'm sorry for those of you who, unlike the Father, have not been able to greet your beloved returning, coming down the road and back to your home. What you would give to forgive everything and throw them a party again. How painful is that final estrangement of death.

It's what our Lenten season quite intentionally is leading us to, facing squarely death and one of the figures who models that for us is Mary Magdalene who was there as witness when they took Jesus, her beloved, down from the

cross, and she faced the pain of that estrangement when they laid his lifeless body in the tomb and she felt that as she walked through the garden on that early morning a few days later. She felt the great pain of that estrangement from the One who had done so much to reconcile her, to draw her from a terrible place of estrangement into the family of God.

It's what the choir will sing about here in a moment, when Mary, full of grief walked in the garden that morning not expecting anything but to visit a grave, the cold hard stone marker of that final estrangement, where memories alone are not enough to console. The last verse which you'll hear them sing goes like this – "When Mary thro the garden went, she sought within the garden ground, one for whom her heart was rent, one for her sake who was bound, one who sought and she was found."

And it's the promise of the Christian faith, the promise of the Resurrection that we'll celebrate in just a few weeks now, the promise that despite all our estrangements, despite the threat of that final estrangement death, Jesus in all his love has gone ahead and stepped into that chasm and filled it for us, filled it up with amazing grace and He is always welcoming us back to ourselves, welcoming us back into reconciliation and relationship with our brothers and sisters and siblings, and finally and ultimately welcoming us back to himself, back to God. That estrangement is the name of life's game can hardly be in doubt, but it doesn't win the game. Grace does. Love does. And we will be strangers no more. Amen!