

March 6, 2016. Fourth in Lent

Luke 15: 1-3

We have all been in situations like this: Situations that were outside our comfort zone: Situations that challenge our expectations and cause us to become very judgmental, and very worthy. We complain, we make disparaging comments, we even gossip. Our best self goes out the window at other people's expense. We need to be right or righteous and others need to be wrong or unworthy.

Then all at once, we begin to hear ourselves. We hear the tone of our voice and the ugliness in our attitudes. We realize we have become "*the pot calling the kettle black*". And we try to find a way to pull back the rhetoric, soften the criticism and extract ourselves from this over exposure.

When we are threatened we seek some sort of control and we can say some awful things to try to regain it. What we really need is **God's uncontrolling love** to open our hearts.

So, let's turn to #21 More Voices and sing Open Our Hearts x3

Luke 15:11-32

Friends, we all know this story by heart. A son who asks for his inheritance far too early, gets it and goes off to Sin city, and promptly blows it and hits rock bottom. He then is so afraid of how his father will be ashamed of him that he takes employment doing the most disgusting job imaginable. One day tired, hungry and humiliated, he realizes that even his father's hired men are treated better than this. He wants to go home, so he sets off, expecting no welcome but hoping for just enough grace to be treated fairly as an employee not a son. He is after all a *disappointment*, and now he knows it. The stay at home older brother knows it too and has different ideas. He wants his disgusting, *disappointing* brother gone again.

Initially, as the church was just starting up, and struggling with who's in and who's out, the interpretation went like this: The people **Jesus** welcomes to his table and happily eats with are the *prodigal sons*. The people who fuss about **Jesus** eating with them are the *older brothers*. So to follow **Jesus**, go and do likewise. *Accept, include and celebrate the prodigal and don't be like the older brother.*

But we know this is easier said than done. This Prodigal parable became distorted over the centuries as Western society began to enforce a Christian morality, and cultural conformity. Somehow along the way, the prodigal became the fall guy held up to derision. Instead of welcoming the prodigal, good Christian folk were to avoid becoming the prodigal, so society could avoid being compelled to welcome, forgive and celebrate the wayward waste-ling. We all know the old saying, "*Waste not; want not.*" Now we know where it comes from.

In recent times, our ever changing Post Modern society has spread the blame around. Each character in turn has become the fall guy. I'm sure you will remember some of these shifting interpretations and their finger pointing.

In the 1960's and 70's moral values and religious strictures were the target of dissent. So, the **older brother** soon became the fall guy. The stay at home and live the straight and narrow **older brother** became the focus of criticism. The Church's rank and file was seen as the older brother who resisted change and who refused to accept the emerging moral relativity of those changing and challenging times.

The 1980's and 90's saw the Baby Boomers nesting and parenting. And sure enough the **father** became the fall guy. In these years of retrenchment and political correctness, the **father** was judged to be over indulgent. The **father** was also acting in denial. Poor parenting techniques were the problem. Blame the problem parents was the easy answer.

When we entered the New Millennium it turned out that **everyone** was wrong.

The **younger son** didn't really repent and didn't deserve forgiveness. He was just looking for a free meal ticket back home: The old failure to launch syndrome. The **older son**, who talked back to his father, possessed no family values and felt entitled to everything. He wouldn't enter the celebration and didn't deserve to. The **indulgent father** remained indulgent, inappropriate and in denial throughout the story. He was a fool, in his patriarchal culture and an embarrassment in our own know-it-all new millennium.

Everyone was wrong! Everyone was lost just like the coin and the sheep that fill out the chapter of the lost in Luke.

Today we are learning to look at this story all over again. We know the blame game doesn't help anymore, so let's start over. Let's start by recognizing that we all have some of the **older brother** in us, we all suffer from the *sin of demanding fairness*. It is an all too human and misunderstood failing. You see, **fairness** is an illusion, something we invent, strive after and try to enforce, in order to feel some sense of control in life. But **fairness** is not the way life unfolds. If it was; **fairness** would be the driving force of creation or evolution. **But it isn't**. Scientists remind us that at least half of everything that occurs is purely random. Fairness is not the way of **God**.

If it was; **fairness** would be the default position for all human relationships.

But it isn't. War and strife make that pretty clear.

As it is, love never plays by our rules of **fairness**. Love always stretches us and pulls us out of our comfort zone away from **what's fair** to **what helps or what's needed**. Remember, there is nothing **fair** going on in our story.

Now on to the **younger brother**:

The hard truth is we all have *disappointed* the people who have loved us. In fact we all have *disappointed* everyone who has ever loved us at some time or another. That is life. It's not fair but it is what it is. We are so interconnected and yet so free to act, that we can't help but *disappoint* the vary people we share love with.

Some *disappoint* more spectacularly than others, but we all do it and we all have done it.

We are all prodigals carrying around within us the burden of being a *disappointment*. We are all prodigals struggling with the pitfalls of freedom and in need of coming home to love and renewal.

And what's more, only a whole lot of love will redeem the day. Only a whole lot of love can untangle this mess that **Jesus** has so expertly and accurately crafted as our story. And not just any kind of love, only a whole lot of **God's uncontrolling** love can receive us back and restore us to who we can become.

Now, notice **the father's** love is out of step with his time, and every other time for that matter. Culturally conditioned parental love is always connected to control in one way or another. It is camouflaged as being responsible and respectable. So, if the **father** acted properly in the first place none of this would have happened. However, this father acts with an **uncontrolling** love from beginning to end, and it is messy and costly. He lets his young son go his own way and learn his lessons the hard way. He welcomes the son's return and happily restores him to his place of love and acceptance, but the inheritance is gone and not to be replaced, and the older brother refuses to forgive or forget for a long time. **Uncontrolling love** is like that. It doesn't make things all better. It makes new beginning possible. A whole lot like something we call resurrection.

Application for Today

Tapping into **God's uncontrolling love** is the sure way to untangle most messes and offer new beginnings.

Give it a try, you won't be *disappointed*.