

## **A NEW CREATION AND AN OLD STORY**

**Sermon preached by Rev. Edee Chase Fenimore**

**March 18, 2007**

Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Luke 15: 11-32

I am a collector. Not of figurines, or antiques, not of paperweights or silver spoons, not even of books though I have more books than I should. I collect stories. I collect stories because I love them and I always have. Since childhood, I have loved hearing stories, creating and telling them. Even before I knew the similarities and differences between myths, legends, fairytales, and parables, I loved them all. My love of stories, particularly if told in front of a fire or sitting outside by the water has only grown over the years. I became involved with a wonderful group of storytellers through The School of Sacred Storytelling. That group encouraged my interest in stories from scripture and other sources- stories that give images for expressions of faith.

All of this is a bit of a confession about how I approached the lessons that were listed on the Presbyterian calendar for this Sunday, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent. When I saw that one of the best stories ever told, the story that we call The Prodigal Son was one of the lessons, I headed right for it. I love this story. I have preached on it often. Last summer I even cheated a bit. Even though it was not listed as a lesson for that week, I decided to do something I had long wanted to do. I told the story from the point of view of the mother. I know there is no mother mentioned but I did it all the same. This story like all good stories invites us in, invites us to find ourselves in the story. Even people who have never read a verse of scripture, who have never been inside a church, who deny being religious, who never express belief in anything know the broad outlines of this story.

In fact there are a multitude of stories from the oral tradition of many different cultures that begin exactly like this one. Once there were two sons. In some cultures it is three or four or more. The younger or the youngest, or the smallest son asks for his share of the inheritance and on getting it leaves home for a great adventure. The adventures may vary in the stories to fit the culture but in all of the stories, things go awry. The inheritance disappears. The young man is left with nothing and is living in filth and disgrace. Up to this point the old stories, handed down through the centuries with the embellishments of many different storytellers are amazingly similar. The stories as they exist in the oral tradition of nearly every culture follow the pattern rather strictly up to this point. I find myself wondering how the hearers of Jesus Nazareth reacted as he began to tell this story. Did some of them stop listening and say to themselves, "Oh, that old tale! I know this story. My Grandma, my Grandpa, the storyteller in the village tells that story."?

Of course, all the hearers who were gathered around Jesus of Nazareth were probably expecting a variation of the tale as it already existed. But the story as it existed in those days involves some magical intervention that rescues the young man from the life of poverty and disgrace in which he finds himself. In some variations of the story he finds a wise old man or a wise old woman,

and is given some tasks to do- slay this dragon, find that gold ring, rescue that maiden- and then the young man is back living the good life, “happily ever after”, as many a story would end.

The master storyteller, Jesus, in telling this tale, takes a detour that I suspect stunned his original hearers. There is no magical intervention, no task to be done in the version that Jesus tells. Instead, in Jesus’ telling, the young man decides that even the servants back at the family homestead are living a better and more comfortable life than he is living. So he rehearses his speech of remorse, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” The young man heads home probably saying those lines over and over again as he approaches the home where he grew up. And here is where the story as Jesus tells it takes another amazing turn. Before the young man gets all the way down the path, the father is running out to greet him. Jesus makes it sound as if the father spends nearly every day just waiting for this son. Jesus makes it sound as if the father was always watching for the son, yearning and straining to catch sight of this child of his- this son who had left with the money and made bad decisions, and wasted all his inheritance and done everything wrong. The father in this story as Jesus told it abandons all the dignity of his position and races down the path to embrace the young man. The well rehearsed speech has not yet been made. The parent loves the child no matter what the child has done, no matter what the child says. The parent loves the child because that is what this parent does. And for Jesus, as the storyteller and for his hearers that difference from the ancient stories is the whole point in telling this story. Let me say it again. The parent loves the child no matter what the child has done, no matter what the child says. The parent loves the child because that is what this parent does.

Jesus goes on to add the party scene- that father puts on a spread, dresses his son in fine clothes, says there should be music and dancing. All of this just underlines the picture of the father’s joy at the son’s return. Even the sober little interlude of the older son, pouting and saying, “You never threw me a party” doesn’t diminish the emphasis on the father’s joy. The words from the writer of Luke, in recording this story that Jesus told, are, “Then the father said to the older son, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found’”.

Jesus took a story pattern that was common in many cultures around the world and changed it, turned it on its side and made it a story about the transforming love of a parent. That leads us right into the lesson from 2 Corinthians. That lesson is not a story but is a letter written by Paul to the church he had founded in Corinth. Paul said to them, “From now on therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.”

Paul is saying that the old familiar ways of thinking do not apply to God’s love that we know in the risen Christ. In Christ, there is a new creation. And that new creation is not brought about by what we accomplish or say or even think. It is because of the great love that God has that we know in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Jesus of Nazareth changed an old familiar story to proclaim in another way that great good news. God waits, no it’s stronger than that... God yearns, straining forward, unable to be patient, so

eager is God to embrace us, to draw us in, to throw us a party. There is nothing we can do that will make God turn away. We say that often in the assurance of pardon that follows our prayer of confession. We are God's beloved children. We are cherished. And if we pay attention, if we turn just the slightest bit toward the kind of life God calls us to live, we will realize that there is a party just waiting to get into high gear- just waiting for us. The One who gives us life and who loves us, embraces us and says, "Put on the robe and the ring. Come, eat, drink, listen to the music- dance! This party is for you".

Thanks be to God