

## WAITING WITH HOPE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

March 14, 2010

Scripture: Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Perhaps one of the most memorable and best loved stories in Christian scripture is the parable of the prodigal. It is the story of a dysfunctional family composed of a wayward son, a dutiful elder brother, a sap of a father who gushes with compassion at the expense of reason not to mention justice, and a silent mother who does not even garner an honorable mention in the telling.

Of course, it's really not fair to call the story the parable of the prodigal son. That is to limit too much the focus of the story.

Because it's also the parable of the elder brother and the parable of the waiting father, and perhaps that of the silent mother as well. Fred Craddock writing on this text has said, where we locate ourselves in the parable will determine so much of what we hear it saying. And he's right. Because the story is about a family with problems, and we can find our way into it through more than one of its principals.

The easiest is the prodigal himself. We recognize his selfishness, his impatience, his rejection of conformity, his need for independence. After all, it's not for nothing that we live in Greenwich Village, this funky, offbeat, Bohemian place with all its quirky, historical, unconventional ways, its late night rhythms and odd juxtapositions, tuxedos and transvestites, art galleries and graffiti on gray walls, kids from New Jersey cruising Christopher Street and East Village watering holes where students hang out looking for hookups. We know about the prodigal, because there's some of him in all of us, or once upon a time there was.

And whether we did, or whether we only wanted to... we know the prodigal's flight to freedom; many of us have taken something valuable, something like the inheritance and blown it on something less.

I will never forget what my brother once said to me. He supported me with financial help throughout the seven years I was in college and seminary, \$50 a month in those days, it went a long way, garnished from his wages as a naval officer serving in Viet Nam. I was embarrassed by his kindness and I once said to him that he shouldn't be doing it. He said, Don't worry, he didn't miss it, and if it were in his pocket he would only have blown it.

John Updike once wrote of his middle aged years, "We celebrated each other's birthdays and break-ups in a boozy, jaunty muddle of mutually invaded privacies. ...the weekend get-togethers supplied courage to last the week."<sup>1</sup>

We know the prodigal's flight to freedom, the desire to break out of the bonds of commitment and responsibility and to ditch the shackles of rules and expectations.

Doesn't everybody chafe sometimes at the bit between the teeth? Or revel in some way, conventional or unconventional, just to assert the right to freedom?

I know someone who keeps his calendar so full that he is exhausted all the time, arriving late and breathless to all his appointments, his calendar so full and flowing over that he cannot lead a full life. His greatest fear... silence because of what it may say to him.

We know the prodigal's flight, because we've all run from something, sought to get out and to get from under and to get past and to get a fresh start, somewhere where nobody cares who we are except that we can pay our own way and bring a few others hanging on as well.

We know the prodigal's flight, because we've all run away with him, or hung onto somebody who was like him, or wished we were him.

But not all of us.... because there is, of course, the older brother. He is decidedly not the prodigal. It's easy to characterize him as the villain in the piece, the boring, older brother. The drone that is nothing if not reliable. The selfless killjoy who is always dour at the idea of a party. He wouldn't think of leaving home. He knows the rules and follows them. Everybody counts on him, because that's the kind of guy he is. Safe, and boring.

But say what you will, he is hardly the villain in the piece. The world runs on folks like this older brother. Without them we would be lost. They are the subway conductors, and truck drivers, and airline pilots who drive and *don't* drink or text at the same time.

They are the people who get up early and go to work and bring home a paycheck and stay overtime and file honest returns and pay taxes and serve on committees and volunteer for election to their co-op board. You can always count on these people. They make good doctors and nurses. They make good scribes and Pharisees, elders and deacons and especially trustees.

I mean you have to give this older kid some credit. He stayed home and took care of his aging parents even after his younger brother had disgraced the family and run off somewhere, they didn't know where, and ruined the family name. It was the older brother that got up every morning and fed the cattle and walked through the cow flops to get the bales of hay to take to the horses.

He was the one who gathered the eggs at daybreak before breakfast and pulled the thorns out of the sheep's hooves when they were injured. He's the one who rode out and tended the fences and made sure the stream was clear of fallen branches. He was the guy who held that family together when his father's heart was longing for a far away, good for nothing brother, and his mother could barely speak because she kept everything inside.

What do you suppose it was like to work like a dog every day on that farm and every time you looked up from your work, and leaned over a shovel, you saw your

father's long face, his eyes looking to the horizon longing for the return of a prodigal who had broken his heart? How do you think that would make you feel?

No, the older brother may have been safe, may have been boring, may have been a drone, but he was nothing if not dutiful in his responsibilities as a son.

All that being said, I can tell you from the text that the feelings that that father had for that elder son were deep and loving. Everything that the father in the parable had was that older boy's possession as well. And the older boy enjoyed the approval and affection and love of his father, whether or not he realized how deep that ran. There was nothing that older son could have asked of his father that he couldn't have had.

But you know how it is with boys. I once had a parishioner who felt so besieged by the fact that she had two sons and no daughters that she started a support group for mothers with two sons, as if it were a cancer support group or a Twelve Step meeting. It wasn't a very large group and the mother who started it was a little on the fringe, but she was probably right to point to the stress that is there when two siblings of the same sex are in one household.

I do know that the older boy in the parable had a gnawing problem in his life, and that gnawing, grinding problem was his younger brother. When the younger brother asked his father for his share of the inheritance he had essentially said to his father, "I wish you were dead." The inheritance, after all, was only distributed on the death of the father. So to ask for it in advance was utterly disrespectful.

And the request was barely out of that kid's mouth, in fact, long before he had even thrown his iPod and t-shirts and underwear in his backpack to leave, that everybody in that town had heard what he had asked of his father. The shame of a younger son asking his father for money that would rightly only come upon the father's death. It was a disgrace. And word travels fast in the neighborhood when one of your kids is in trouble.

When that younger son left on the bus that day with his bag in one hand and a guitar in the other and the wad of cash tucked into the pocket of his jeans, everybody up and down that road was out sweeping the sidewalks and trimming the hedges and looking down at that family's house.

And thus began the waiting. The fallow time, the time of in-between when nothing much was happening at home, except the waiting and watching. The prodigal found his way to the Big Apple, of course, via the Port Authority, and he got an apartment room and started doing the clubs, and meeting new friends who thought he was cute. They saw the wad of cash in his pocket as well.

It went okay for awhile, about how the boy had hoped it might, until the money ran out, and he had to take a job we can hardly talk about in a polite place like this. But one thing is for sure, in time the boy's thoughts turned to home and he began rehearsing the confession of his condition.

Meanwhile, the older brother back home got up every morning, as before, and did what was expected, and wondered what his brother might be up to that day, with the money he had taken, and his fancy thoughts of cutting a record, or dancing on Broadway, or writing a book, or getting into acting, or whatever it was he used as an excuse for leaving. And he ground his teeth each morning and each night as he thought about him and what he must be doing. The women, the booze, the drugs.

And then of course there was the father who went out on the porch every morning with his cup of coffee and looked at the horizon and waited in hopes that one day that younger boy would cut a figure in the distance, his jaunty, thin silhouette coming into view somewhere down the road just at the edge of where the line of sight meets the dawning and the sunset.

And of course, because we know the story, we know that his watching and his waiting did not go unrewarded. The younger son comes home, and there is the elaborate welcome, the ring, the shoes, the robe, the fatted calf restoring him to full communion in the family, at no small cost to the dignity and pride of that father.

And then there was the party and the mariachi band and the mojitos and the laughter at the homecoming. And there was the elder brother coming in from the fields and seeing the party and hearing that his good for nothing brother had come home. And how at the end, the story is unfinished, because the father wants the older brother to come in and we never know whether he does or not.

It's quite a story. And while it's inviting to think about the younger brother and his foray into the bright lights and fast lane. And it's sobering to contrast him with the serious and weighty example of duty represented by the older brother. It's really the father who holds the parable together, because the two sons, interesting as they may be are not the shells with the pea. The whole story turns on that father, that father who waits, and watches, and hopes; hoping that his waiting and watching will not be in vain. Without that father and his hope for his sons this would be just another account of a dysfunctional family torn apart by sibling rivalry, fodder for Dr. Phil and not insight into the nature of God.

Because what Jesus wants us to understand in telling us this story is that whether we are faithful droning dutiful older brothers or sisters, or whether we are prodigals far from home, there is one who is waiting up for us, one whose love for us exceeds our expectations and our deserving, and who is hoping against all hope that we will come to the party where the invitation is to enter in and make ourselves at home where we are always welcome, deserving or not.

Michael Lindvall, pastor at the Brick Church a few years ago on Confirmation Sunday, helped unpack the meaning and import of this hopeful and waiting parent for the benefit of the fifteen year olds in the class and their parents in the congregation. He said,

Like the father in the story, just as parents give you the freedom to go, they'll be waiting up for you. If you go out with friends on Friday night,

your mom might just say, “I’ll wait up for you honey.” Or when you go out to a game on Saturday, you just know that your dad will still be up, waiting in front of the History Channel until he hears the back door open. And it’s not just Friday and Saturday nights these next few years. They’ll be waiting up for the first time you come home on break from college or home on leave from the navy. They wait up when you fly home from Chicago or Houston the year you get your first job. They’ll be waiting up when you drive home in a mini-van full of their grandchildren. They’ll wait up long after all the stars have risen and the sheep have quieted down. They wait up because they love you with an undying and burning passion, love you so much it makes them ache.

Then, in a comment that takes us to the heart of the matter, Michael said:

We’ve tried to wait up for our own kids over the years. The older two said it made a difference. It mattered that we trusted them enough to let them go out – even if our curfew was never late enough. To hear them tell it, it was the earliest curfew in the State... But they said it made a difference that all through the evening they knew somebody was thinking about them, knew somebody was loving them and worrying over them. It made a difference just knowing that.<sup>2</sup>

It does make a difference, you know, to know that someone is loving you and waiting for you, even from afar, even in unseen ways, hoping for the best, longing to see you, wishing you well, praying for your welfare. The father of the parable, who is like father and mother to us all, is like that. Hoping for the best for us, giving us the freedom even to run away, loving us enough to let us go in the hope that we will eventually come back again, not just because we need to, but mostly because we want to.

Hope is like that. God’s hope for us is like that. A little out of synch with the realities of the moment, but persistent nonetheless.

Beth Waldemath and David Lewicki are friends in the ministry here in New York. Beth was a candidate under care of this church and presbytery. They have two children, James who is about two, and Margaret Grace who was born this past New Year’s Eve at 28 weeks and 6 days. For the last 11 weeks of her development in the womb Margaret Grace grew without amniotic fluid. So it’s been touch and go with multiple complications in the NICU ever since. Surgeries, procedures, bypass feeding, IV’s, lots of doctors and two hospitals so far.

It’s been a lot of time waiting and watching and hoping. Beth writes a journal each day, and this week she wrote about an experience she had with waiting and watching and hoping.

Before the last bronchoscopy, [Beth writes,] I went to the pharmacy to buy band-aids and lotion for my hands that crack and bleed from all the sanitizing. I found myself staring in a daze at a make-up display

remembering my mother's advice during my brooding teenage years. "Put on some lipstick, it will make you feel better." I pulled out the hue that looked most like her favorite, Frosted Apricot. The label read, "Hope." I bought that and a tube of concealing foundation. They have served me well. The foundation has convinced at least 3 separate people that I am "well-rested." The lipstick, well, it turned out to be more of a neon orange than a frosted apricot, but after that fearful day, I realize Hope is kind of like that...a little too bright to match what else you have going on.

I have a feeling God understands exactly what Beth is saying. God is forever in the situation of wearing hope, a condition that is a little too bright to match what else is going on.

But there God is, nonetheless, with one child not sure whether he is even welcome to return, and the other not sure whether he wants to come into the party at all, while God waits up and watches with hope.

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<sup>1</sup> John Updike, **Self-Consciousness**. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989) 55.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Lindvall, Moveable Feast paper 2004, unpublished, “March 21, Fourth Sunday in Lent”.