



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 18 March 2007
Title: **"A New Creation."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Joshua 5:9-12
Second Reading 2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Gospel Luke 15:11-32

Today's Gospel contains the parable that is probably the most beloved of them all: the story of the Prodigal Son. Just so everyone remembers, a "prodigal" is someone who wanders away from the straight and narrow. The main point of the story, of course, is that this prodigal eventually comes home again. It has been often said that this parable has been the subject of sermons that have looked at it from the angle of just about everybody in the story except the fatted calf...and even that has probably been tried several times!

One thing that is sometimes neglected is the way it *ends*. True, we all follow closely the saga of the young man who goes into a far country, loses all his money, and then determines to return home and throw himself at his father's feet. We hear him rehearse his speech before he gets there, and we are moved when he doesn't get to finish it before his father picks him up off the road and embraces him. We listen with concern to the description of the elder brother who has stayed home and worked hard for his dad. We secretly identify with his complaint that the father's gushing over the bad son is unfair. But of course we also learn from the father's speech that it is better to rejoice at a sinner who returns than it is to hold out for cold justice alone. But that is where the story ends. What we *don't* get is a final scene in which the elder brother and the younger one are reconciled and go in to share together the

letson baca that has been prepared to celebrate the occasion. Why is that? Was there an original ending that got lost? Did a scribe lose one of the pages? Did Jesus just forget to tie up the loose ends? I don't think so. Our Lord left this parable open. We are meant to decide for ourselves what the ending is because we are expected to live out this parable in our own lives.

There are some who will be able to identify with the son who runs away and wastes his inheritance. There are those who have to hit rock bottom before they come to their senses and realize what awful mistakes they have made. It takes a combination of desperation and also courageous resolve to get the kid back on his feet and on his way towards Dad. Those who have been down there know how generous God's mercy is when we really need it. It's not a matter of our deserving it, or even of working hard to earn it. The only thing the prodigal son does is to admit that he can't do it alone, and his pathetic journey back is about all the action he can muster. Those who can identify with the prodigal son in the story inevitably find this parable a powerful source of hope and forgiveness.

But Jesus *didn't* tell the parable for those who would identify with *that* son- not really. His primary concern was to show the danger of *not forgiving*. That is why the character of the elder son appears when he does in the story, and why he is still standing there, undecided, at its end. What is that son going to do? How will he react to his father's words? Well, *you* tell me.

Because *you* are the elder son. *I* am the elder son. Far more important to me than God's mercy to someone *else* is the justice that God must render to satisfy *my pride*. I have done so much to please God, been the best of priests, businessmen, insurance brokers (you fill in the blank), and I have dutifully gone to church, and given my money and followed the rules...the whole nine yards. I'll be damned if I'm going to be happy when some upstart newcomer thinks he or she can just waltz in here and sit in my pew and take up *my God's* time in saying that they're sorry. They *ought* to be sorry. And they ought to be *punished*. Otherwise, why am I here? Why do I put up with the pretense of the Christian life if *I* don't get something out of it that *other* people *don't get*? If being in church doesn't make *me* special, what's the

point? God should be much happier that I'm here than all those *compromised* folks- the ones who are divorced or the ones who have cheated on their spouse, or cheated on their boss, or the willfully unemployed or gay people or hypocrites...yes, *those* are the worst: don't you just *hate* hypocrites? Don't you wish God would *do* something about them?

And so it goes. You may think that I'm play acting here, but I'm not. I'm deadly serious: that is what Jesus is talking about in the parable today. He knows that we are most concerned about our own rights and privileges and that our compassion most often comes a distant second to the need to feel that we have *got what's coming to us*- what we deserve- especially if it means that "those other people" *won't* get it. Most people entertain a secret glee when someone gets caught. It can be watching someone get stopped by the traffic police or observing the moral demise of some politician or celebrity. It pleases us, because it makes us feel somehow better than the poor guy who got it. And unless he "gets it", justice hasn't been served.

And so our Lord Jesus Christ leaves the end of the parable open. We, who have been cast as the elder brother, now have a choice to make. How do we end the story? Do we stay outside and sulk? Do we demand that our father give our brother the punishment he most justly deserves? Or do we try to understand that we, too, are the recipients of the Father's forgiveness- that the party, the household, the Church will never have been complete until the prodigals come home. Justice is trumped by compassion. Retribution is overwhelmed by love. And that's why our parish mission statement ends with the commitment to "bring all to unity with God and each other."

How do we overcome the "Elder Brother Syndrome"? How do we put our pride on hold while we join God in being happy when someone comes home to Him? I suppose that first of all one must give him or herself the credit that old dogs can be taught new tricks and that any of us, however stuck in our ways, can be open to the New Thing that God does in Jesus. Perhaps the first step is not working at forgiving others, as much as letting God forgive us.

You see, central to our unwillingness to forgive others is the fear that *we ourselves* won't be forgiven. Maybe the best that we can hope for is a *just* God, not a *loving* one. But that's just plain wrong. That is not giving God the credit for originality- for being able to take garbage and do some amazingly beautiful things. Listen to St Paul again, writing on the top of his form:

"For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!" That includes our attitudes, fellow elder brothers. Thanks be to God.