

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, March 18, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.”

Now, I won't do the entire sermon down here. I know it scares people.

My sermon theme is about rejection. It is my opinion that rejection is throughout this passage, and it is also something that leaves a mark on our souls.

I remember one Saturday several churches ago. I won't identify the people or the place, and they are both dead now so I think I can use the illustration. They were in their 80s. They had been married over 60 years. It was on a Saturday, when almost no one calls a preacher unless it's an emergency. They called me. I thought it was an emergency, and I went over. It turns out they were having a marital fight, actually, a pre-marital fight, something they had been fighting about since before they got married. Rejection leaves a mark. It seems briefly they broke up before they got married, and the woman went up in a biplane with one of those dashing pilots at a state fair, and it hurt the husband to be so much that they still fought over it. They still fought over it.

Another not so funny. A young couple got way too involved, way too young before they could handle the emotions. The girl in the couple, a teenage girl, cut it off. When she cut off the relationship, the young boy felt the rejection so acutely, and he was disturbed, and he became violent, and he killed her. He killed himself. This, too, happened in a former congregation of mine.

Rejection leaves a mark. Rejection can lead to violence and death and a lifetime of not speaking or a lifetime of rearguing the same fight over and over. Rejection hurts and wounds deeply. It leaves a mark. Perhaps, it even leaves a mark on the heart of God. After all, God is a jealous God. We are told right off to have no other gods. It costs even God to overcome our rejection. God overcomes our rejection with life and love and forgiveness and the offer of open arms, acceptance and relationship. God is willing to take on our sin and rejection because God loves us that much, as much as the cross, and the cross left a mark.

We, on the other hand, practice what I think, to make a baseball analogy, is the one strike rule. Someone rejects us once, that's it, we write them off, and that's wrong. That is not how God behaves.

First, the younger son rejects the father and all that he has to offer for the great wide open, for that far country, which he thinks must be better. The lure of the far country overcomes any affection or respect that he has for his father, and he says, about as disrespectfully as you could, dad, let's pretend that you are dead. Now, what would I get? That much, huh? Good. I can have a lot of fun with that much. Well, let's do it. Give me my inheritance now. See ya!

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You know no group of people can be crueler to each other than family unless, of course, it's church people, to those who are caught in flagrant sin. Imagine! Dad, I can't hang around here waiting for you to drop dead. Put your will into effect right now so I can get away from you and on with my life. I just need the money. It will be so much better when I'm away from you and with your money. Now, the father doesn't slap his son on the side of the head, which would be the South Carolina tradition, instead, he gives the boy what the boy thinks will make him happy, and then the father waits. The younger son rejects his father's home and hospitality and moral values, and lives as wild and as far away as his money can carry him, and then his money ran out.

The older son knew what would really tweak the father, so when the younger son came home, the older son helped the hurt along. He helped the hurt be more hurtful. He let out that the younger son had not only insulted him by taking his money, but also had rejected the father's morality, everything he had taught, and spent it on wild living and loose women. That's apparently true. The older son wanted to make sure that the younger got what was coming to him. The older son, now he rejected the father's right to forgive. He rejected the father's right to forgive.

They both rejected the father's love, didn't they? One through selfish, self-indulgence and the other through self-centered judgment, judging his younger brother as less deserving than himself. He kind of reminds me of that old joke. You've heard it.

Two guys go camping in the woods, and a grizzly bear shows up, and one starts quickly putting on his shoes. The guy says, why are you wasting time putting on your shoes? He says, "I don't have to outrun the bear. I just have to outrun you." Now, that's a joke, but if you theologize the punch line, in our minds we get a picture kind of like this in our head, and it reminds me of these two brothers. We don't have to be perfect. We just have to be a little bit better than the other guy to whom we're comparing ourselves. God will have to accept us because we're just a little bit better.

No. The truth is there is a standard for which God is looking, and we all, all, all have failed, not just scored badly, failed. Scripture says, "All have sinned, all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God, all." Sin is real, and finding someone a little worse than you does not make you holy in God's eyes. The only thing that can help us, the only thing that can help us, is the grace of God. The grace of God, and it is a good thing that Jesus arranged for that to be available to all who have sinned, to every one of us.

Universal sin takes from us the right to look down upon and feel better than anyone else, and God's universal offer of grace does the same thing.

Martin Nemours, a Lutheran pastor, said, "God is not the enemy of my enemies. God is not even the enemy of His enemies." God has a huge capacity to forgive. The older son was incensed that the father was throwing a party for the prodigal, a celebration he questioned for this miscreant, this bum, this disrespectful, wasteful, promiscuous,

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substance abuser. Are you out of your mind? Father, how's he ever going to learn his lesson if you put rings on his fingers and robe on his back and kill the fatted calf? If he gets a party for rejecting everything you've ever taught him was right, then what do I get for behaving myself all these years? Tell me, what do I get? The father pleads. The father pleads with the complaining brother, let go of your resentment, and come into the party. You see, the older son rejects the father's heartfelt begging to please be happy, your brother is alive. He will not enter the party of the sinner returned home. The brother just won't do it, but isn't that what we celebrate as the very heart of the Gospel?

Rejoicing at the return of the lost. Rejoicing at those who come to themselves and return and turn to God and God's embrace? He said, please son, we had to throw a party. We had to celebrate. What else could we do? He was lost and now he is found. He is dead and now he is alive again. We had to throw a party.

The good news is that the Gospel allows homeruns, allows returns to sender, and allows parent and child reunions. God's love made it possible. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection made it real. Rejection, then repentance, then embrace in God's arms. That's what the story is all about. It's about we could use the word conversion. Conversion, a change. It begins when we see that we have rejected God and rejected others and chosen only ourselves above all. Of this, we must repent, and repent simply means to turn around, to turn away from that, and head back home to God.

God is the real actor in this parable. As the father, he rejects the power of our sin. He rejects the power of our sin and guilt to keep us away from Him. God is the actor in Jesus Christ making a way for us to be forgiven and to be rid of guilt and to overcome the urge to shuck it all and to live in the dirt of the far country. God is more like a magnet, drawing, tugging, the pulling power of grace to make us come to ourselves and realize this is not who I am, this is not where I want to be, this is not the scowl I was meant to wear, this is not the leer I was meant to wear, this is not the empty, empty, empty seeking of thrill after thrill until it becomes boring and we, deploring what we once adored, find that our lives have been spent on nothing! On nothing!

Yes, God is the magnet, drawing and tugging through the power of grace to call us home to ourselves and to His arms, to realize this is not who I am, this is not where I want to be, and so we turn and we find God is waiting and watching for us. Final repentance means joining the party of all those sinners, who have come to themselves and return to God's embrace. No matter who we are, we are among that group called sinner.

You know, we as good church people don't welcome sinners at the door when they come. God welcomes all of us. This is our God, who rejoices more over a lost sheep being found than the 99 who think they never strayed. This is our God, who spends everything He has to throw a party because of the one lost coin that was found. This is the God, who wants you, who wants us in all our sickness, grief and despair and all your self-loathing, inadequacy, remorseful penitence, and all your confusion, sadness, guilt, and all your sin. This is the God, who wants you to come to the table and sit and eat and drink and

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celebrate because this isn't just about being lost and found. It is about dying and being reborn. It is about resurrection. It is the promise of new life that is possible with God. A new direction and a new life. The end of the story, I guess, is up to us. We can and some do, learn to like the dirt, or learn to live with thrills and mind-numbing little hobbies until we die, or we could accept that reality is different than most of the world thinks, that God is real, and really like the father Jesus described in the parable.

Accept that and turn to God. Not everyone does. Not everyone does. Some think only other people sin. Some think how dare God forgive the likes of him or how dare God celebrate someone like her. Well, maybe God can forgive that, maybe God can, but I can't! I will not! Some say I have earned my place in the Father's house. I have behaved. I reject God's grace from our so-called brothers. I reject God's grace from our so-called sisters. I will stand on my own two feet. I will stand on my own reputation. I will stand on my own record. What choice does God have but to accept me home whenever I decide to wander God's way?

Yeah, God has little choice, some people think, than to hug me home when I've been good, and I know all the sins of all the sinners, who have drifted and dirtied themselves away out there where I have never been, out there where I have never been! So I stand innocent among the accused. Some people think surely God will accept me. Surely God will accept me!

I warn you, as I close, I warn you God is not fair. Some will sin more openly than you, and arrive in God's arms, and others, like you and me, too good or too cowardly to sin boldly and publicly, sin only inside where no one else can see, where no one can see, and then we think to ourselves, surely God would not hold me accountable for what's in my heart! Surely God will not hold me accountable for what's in my heart! Sinners are those who sin publicly. Right? Amen.