

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 31, 2019
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
1 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3m 11b-32

I have a “flat Jesus.”

I’ve had it a long time now. I’m not sure how long. Youth attending General Convention four years ago (maybe seven years ago ... or even ten?) were handing them out. The idea was to give everyone a “flat Jesus” so that we could all take Jesus out with us into the world: to foreign countries and exotic locations, perhaps, or to the local park and other family outings. And then we’d all post photos of all the places we were taking our “flat Jesus” on Facebook.

Looking straight at it, my laminated Jesus is as big as my hand. Turned sideways, it’s paper-thin. It makes Jesus easy to carry, of course, but to my mind it begs the question of whether doing so carries any weight. That might be a problem. A Jesus without depth or substance, who is only paper-thin, literally doesn’t matter outside.

And Jesus is all-too-commonly rendered flat and paper-thin. He’s hardly the only one: the Bible is full of people and places that remain thin, both to us and to the world out there.

The opening verses of this morning’s gospel, for example, speaks of tax collectors and sinners and of Pharisees and scribes. They’re recurring characters in the gospels. But for all that, they’re easily left thin for us, little more than cartoon caricatures of fun-loving wayward recklessness on one hand and miserable hard-hearted prigs who never learned to dance on the other.

The parable Jesus tells can help, if we let it. He tells the story in response to the grumbling grumblers who grumble against him. Jesus is telling a tale on them. And in the telling, I think he tells us a little bit more *about* them, as well ... so that these paper-thin categories acquire depth.

And in the telling, I think Jesus tells them and us a bit more about himself, as well. Like the father who welcomes the prodigal son home, Jesus is the one who welcomes tax collectors and sinners ... and who banquets with them. And like the father in that same parable who goes out to the grumbling son, Jesus is the one who is put in the position of having to defend himself against those who have always held true, never disobeying a command.

By the time Jesus is done telling his story, nobody is merely a caricature – at least not if we’re giving the story more than our passing interest. There’s more substance to them all in the end.

The first thing to say about his parable is that it’s badly named. That’s not Jesus’ fault; he didn’t name it “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Neither did Luke.

The name came along later, as someone decided that this parable was primarily about the younger child, the one who's gone away as a stand-in for all who have gone astray. The name given to the parable suggests that the point of the parable is to describe a sinner's journey away from God and the way back home again.

Other names have been offered. It's been called the parable of the two sons, and there's truth in that renaming, for it is surely a story about both of the children. It's been called the parable of the lost sons, hinting at the fact that both children went missing – one of them left home and the other stayed while keeping distant from family. Some say it's the parable of the good father ... and I think that's getting closer, but it still misses all the same time.

For my part, at least this time around, I'll stay with Jesus who tells us simply "There was a man with two sons." That's as close as he gets to giving it a name. So it's a parable about a father, yes; but not classically a "good" father. And there are two the sons, as well, two children – so very different and yet so much the same.

The story is about all of three of them ... and that makes it a story about Jesus and the tax collectors and sinners and the Pharisees and scribes. And that makes it a story about all of us. It's an appalling story from the start. When the younger son asks for his share of what "will belong" to him, he's asking for his inheritance. But his parents aren't dead yet – at least not his father. That's the first offense. He tells his father to drop dead: not literally, perhaps, but functionally. For all intents and purposes, he wishes his father were dead and gone so he can go on to live the life he wants.

It's a terrible thing, asking his father to drop dead. And shocking that the father unhesitatingly obliges. "So he divided his property between them," that's what our text says. Literally, he rips his life apart for the both of them. ⁱ

And one son stayed. And the other son left.

The son who left accepted the gift. That's a point in his favor. He sets off on a grand adventure. He's going to chart his own course, live his own life.

But he squanders it all, we're told, "in dissolute living." We don't really know what that means, except that it's clear he spent it all like there's no tomorrow, without regard for anyone else. The brother who stayed will later say that he spent it on prostitutes, but he wasn't there, he doesn't know ... and it's clear he holds a grudge.

The thing is, it might have worked out all right for the younger son, except for an unforeseen famine that put him in a desperate spot. It's the perfect storm of bad choices and circumstance and happenstance. And then, of course, he looks around and sees that all alone in a hard world. And he comes to his senses.

But it's hard to really know what that means. He may genuinely regret the choices he's made, the way he treated his father, abandoned his family. Maybe. But it may be, as one commentator puts it, that "his conversion is more stomach-driven than heart-felt." He may just know enough to know he'd be better off working for his soft-touch father.

Not that it matters, at least not to the father.

By rights, the father should have stayed put; he should have stayed on the porch. Make the wayward son come to him, tail between his legs. Make him give his speech and show that he's really changed. Accept him back, perhaps, but only provisionally ... give him a chance.

But the father doesn't wait. As soon as he sees his son off in the distance, he unhesitatingly runs out to greet him. (Which for this time and place is a more scandalous response than any of us can possibly comprehend.) He doesn't care why. Love doesn't care why.

And the father doesn't have time for carefully-crafted confessions. The son begins ...

"But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get [the fatted calf] ... We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

And all this because love never waits for apologies or for proof.

The younger son didn't expect that.

And neither did the elder one.

And that's what makes them more alike that it might seem. They're just opposite sides of the same coin. Both expected the younger son to have to prove something.

The elder son never left home, but he's as far from home as anyone in this story. He thinks he's been conscientious all along. Working. Never disobeying a command. And imagining that his lifeless obedience and heartless compliance is what was expected of him.

And so he can make no sense of the father's welcome. He might have understood a more provisional welcome, one offered after all the appropriate apologies, one that allowed a probationary period during which the younger son demonstrated his contrition and amendment of life. But not this. And so he refuses to join the family reunion.

By rights, the father should have stayed put; he should have stayed at the party. Compel this son to stop pouting. Make him come out to the father. Wait for him to get hungry and come inside.

But the father doesn't wait. As soon as he hears that his other son is staying outside, the father unhesitatingly crosses the threshold of the house once more, opening arms of love, begging this other son to take part in the celebration of being one family again. (Which, again, given the culture and the times is a more scandalous response than any of us can possibly comprehend.)

It breaks his heart that this son chooses pride and propriety over love and family, that he thinks proving himself and his worth were the most important things in life. Love doesn't care.

Love doesn't care about any of the reasons we keep ourselves apart from God, for one another. Neither child sees that. Neither child lives as love shows. But love cares not either way. Love only loves ... and only for the sake of love.

I have a "flat Jesus."

But the world doesn't need a "flat Jesus," a Jesus without mass, one that doesn't matter.

So we need a parable such as this – a story that tells us about ourselves and what matters most. God gives us life ... gives life to all of us, to tax collectors and Pharisees, to sinners and scribes, to you and to me. God gives life to all of us for love's sake. And we get to choose what to do with it.

All-too-often, of course, we waste what's been given us. We live without hardly acknowledging the giver of all that we have. But if we ever find ourselves at a loss, love is ready to enfold us. We don't need to come on bended knee. We only need to allow ourselves to be welcomed home again.

On the other hand, of course, it's all-too-easy for us to settle for the idea that God expects us to work diligently and obey the rules, as if that's how we prove our worth ... as if proving ourselves is the point of it all. But if we ever get worn out by such a hard way to live, God welcomes us home again, as well; enjoy the music of life; join the dance of love.

No, we don't need to take a "flat Jesus" out into the world. We need to take a more substantial Jesus than that. We do so, to borrow from the words of Michael Curry, as we go out and live like Jesus, laugh like Jesus, give and forgive like Jesus, dance like Jesus ... and love like Jesus.

And then we might take with us out into the world a Jesus who matters.

ⁱ Rob Myallis @ <http://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/2013/03/luke-1511-32.html> highlights some textual details. The son asks for his share of his father's property (ουσιας ... the "essence" of his father). The father "divided his property" (βιον ... his "life") between them. The son goes on to squander his ουσιας in that foreign country. Later, the elder son complains that his brother devoured the father's βιον with prostitutes. As Myallis observes:

These words mean more deeply "life" or "essence." (Think: Ousia from "one ousia three hypostasis"; and bios in "biology"). It is striking that the Father is asked and gives not simply of his money, but of his essence, his life, his estate.