

Date: March 28, 2004

SUNDAY: Lent 4

SERMON: The Homecoming

Text(s): Luke 15:1-3; 11-32

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“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the religious teachers and lawyers were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

So he told them this parable: There was a man who had two sons. . .”

It seems this man was an entrepreneur who had learned something about electronics when he was in the army during WW II. After the war, when IBM and other big companies were beginning to put their energies into developing computers and bring on the computer revolution, he saw an opportunity. He taught himself everything he could about these new-fangled machines, and eventually he set up a small factory on the outskirts of Boston making components for computers and developing software for them. One decision he had made was to keep the business private, rather than taking it public. So all of the stock was held privately, much of it within the family. He liked it that way— he didn’t care about becoming a mega-corporation. Now he was easing himself into retirement with a comfortable fortune, and turning more and more of the business over to his two sons.

His elder son was a chip off the old block— hard-working, mature, good manager, always something of an overachiever, as the older child often is. He’d gone to MIT when the business was still small and his dad really sacrificed to send him to such an expensive school, and then he’d gone on to Harvard for his MBA. He had known all along that he would take over the family business some day, and he was fully prepared to step into his old man’s shoes when the day came. He and his wife had the requisite 2.3 children; they lived in an expensive, but not flashy house in Beacon Hill.

He was President of the Rotary Club, was a member of the church and served on its Board of Trustees, though it was his wife who was the regular attender and who was more actively involved in the church. He often went to the office on Sundays to catch up on things, because keeping ahead of the competition demanded such extra time and commitment, and he was no stranger to 70-hour weeks. He and his wife had a season-ticket to the Boston Symphony even though he really didn’t enjoy music all that much; if the truth were known, he usually dozed off during the performance. Often during the concerts he found that he was thinking about the business, and how to keep his competitive edge.

He was also a bit worried about his younger brother. They were eight years apart in age, and so had never really been close as children. His mom and dad had been nearly forty when his younger brother was born, so they were a lot more mellow in raising him than they had been with their firstborn. In fact, they were downright indulgent. Not to put too fine a point on it, the kid was spoiled rotten. He loafed his way through school, not setting the world on fire academically, though he was bright enough and had gone to a fine university, where he almost flunked out because he was more interested in majoring in women and frat parties than he was in his studies. He had no real focus in his life. He knew he was expected to go into the family business, and that one day he and his older brother would own the whole works, but he also knew that his older brother would always be the one calling the shots. It’s not that he didn’t admire his older brother; he did, he really respected him, but he had no burning desire to be like him, because he found his older brother incredibly boring. He himself was a people person, a total extrovert, as younger children often are. Which made him a natural to be Executive Vice President for Sales, and he seemed to be really good at it— except he really never seemed to take it very seriously. In fact, he often was bored whenever the subject of the business came up in family conversation, which,

of course, it always did. So it's not surprising his older brother figured he'd have to keep an eye on his younger sibling. He was a good enough businessman to sniff the potential for problems in the wind.

One day, the elder brother's anxieties about his younger brother became an all-too-distressing reality. The younger brother came to the father and said, "Look, Dad. I know you're going to be disappointed, but I can't spend the rest of my life selling computer components and software. This buttoned-down look and Rotary-club life is not for me. I want to live! How can I be content here in Beantown when I know that the Riviera is waiting. So how about signing over to me the shares of stock that you're planning to leave to me in your will and then I'm off to see the wider world. When you go off to the big hard-drive factory in the sky, you can leave everything else to my brother, and you'll rest secure in the knowledge that it's in better hands anyway. There's more to life than working 60 or 70 hours a week and going to the symphony on Saturday and church on Sunday. Come on, Dad. I want what's mine now."

Of course the father's heart is broken. His dream of leaving his business in which he has invested his whole life, in the hands of his two sons is bursting like a bubble right in front of his eyes. He argues and reasons and pleads with his over-indulged son, but to no avail. The kid is going whether he wants him to or not. So with heavy heart, he signs over the shares in the company that he had already designated in his will. He knows, as any parent does, that he can't finally control what his children do. And he probably is kicking himself for the mistakes he made—giving his younger son too much without teaching him responsibility, making things too easy for him. But it really hurts when the younger son, says, "So long, Dad. I'll call you every chance I get, but life's too short to die of boredom."

So off he goes into the world to find his

own way. The first thing he does, of course, is buy a new Porsche with some of his inheritance. If he's going to travel, it's going to be in style. And for a while, he has a wonderful time. Who wouldn't? No responsibilities, lots of money. And he's surrounded by lots of friends. Anybody with a Porsche and a lot of dough to throw around is going to be popular. And of course, he doesn't call home very often, as he said he would. Life is good. Life is moving. Things are happening. He goes to the restaurants where the celebrities hang out in New York, frequents the clubs in the Village that feature live jazz, makes his pilgrimage to Nice and Cannes and Monte Carlo, where he learns the joys of high-stakes gambling. For more than a year, he has the time of his life. Life's a beach.

Of course, we know how this scene is going to end, don't we. It's a hackneyed old plot, after all. We've seen it coming all along. One night, he has ingested just enough Ecstasy and booze to give him the confidence to bet the farm at the blackjack table. Sure enough, he loses his shirt to some much more experienced high rollers. They see him coming like a lamb to be fleeced, and they oblige him. His shares of stock are wiped out. He risks everything he has and he loses everything, right down to his gold Rolex. He is on the street in a foreign country with empty pockets. Well, can't say he didn't have it coming to him. And he certainly discovers how many real friends he had. Zero. The party's still going on, but he's not the life of it anymore. He's history. He makes a few collect transatlantic phone calls to some of the contacts he made while in business to ask for a loan to get himself back on his feet again. But they won't touch him. They're not about to risk anything on somebody who's proven himself to be so irresponsible. And he can't bring himself to call his dad or his older brother. That would be too humiliating. Besides, he's burned his bridges there. He ends up spending the next several nights under a bridge in Marseilles along with some homeless alcoholics

and drug addicts. And the smell?--well, it's indescribable. He doesn't even have enough money for food, and so he ends up scrounging like the other street people in the dumpster outside a MacDonalds.

It's when he's sitting there, dirty and hungry, with his back up against a dumpster while eating some cold, greasy french fries, that he comes to himself. Of course, we'd say he's never been in touch with his true self. He's never realized who he really is or what he's thrown away. He's been so alienated from himself by everything coming so easily for him, that he's been away from himself most of his life. But now he comes to himself. And he realizes what he's done and who he is. He's a spoiled, self-indulgent, irresponsible, adult with a terminal case of adolescence. He's broken his father's heart, alienated his older brother, thrown away the results of years of his family's hard work. He's a pig. And that MacDonald's dumpster in which he's been rooting is his pigpen.

So he says, "I've blown it. I'm a pig. I've lived like a pig. I've acted like a pig. I've thought about nobody but myself. I deserve everything that's happened to me. And I miss my dad and my older brother, and they probably hate me for what I've done, but I'm going to try to go home anyway. I'll take whatever they're inclined to dish out. If my brother will give me a job sweeping up the shop every day, I'll take it. At least I'll be home and have steady work, and maybe find a way to make it up to my family for my lack of responsibility."

So in this newly virtuous frame of mind, he heads for the American consulate which puts him on a plane to New York (after making him sign an IOU agreeing to reimburse the government when he gets home). And he has to put up with the undisguised contempt he sees in the consular officer's face. That consular officer has seen this same scenario so many times before. And that hurts—to think that even his sins are so banal and commonplace that he has become what

he always was afraid of becoming— boring and predictable. From New York, he begins hitchhiking home to Boston. As he begins to get nearer, those final miles are some of the longest he's ever traveled. He's rehearsing himself for the scene he suspects is coming. His father, angry and aloof, hurt and proud. His older brother furious, ready to throw him out in the street. He knows he's going to have to really eat crow and humiliate himself. But what could be worse than the humiliation he's already suffered.

But as he turns off the road into the older, fashionable neighborhood with its tall trees and catches sight of the big house, he also sees something he never expected to see— some very un-Yankee-like behavior— his father in his bathrobe, running down the street, calling his name, his arms outstretched in welcome. And before he even gets the chance to start his litany of confession and apology and eat his slice of humble pie, his dad is hugging him and kissing him and crying and laughing all at the same time and shouting orders to the housekeeper to get his son some new clothes and a new ring for his finger, and call the caterer to set up a feast with lobster and filet mignon and some really good wines, and start inviting the neighbors and some family friends. And so the party begins.

When the older brother gets home from the office, he parks his Mercedes in the driveway and gets out, surprised at the noise he hears coming from the house. He hears music and laughter, and the clinking of glasses raised in toast. And then his dad comes out to meet him, happier than he's seen him in years. "What's going on, Pop? Did IBM offer to buy us out for a big pile of money or something?"

"No, no my boy. Something much better! Your brother has come home again. He's back! We're a family again. Everything's going to be all right now. He can take over the sales division again."

Well, this is "thrilling" news to the older

brother, as you can imagine. Isn't he thrilled to welcome back a spoiled, irresponsible, spendthrift brat who never grew up and never did a responsible thing in his life or showed any concern for anyone but himself? Sure, he's thrilled all right! He's thrilled with anger and resentment. Do you think he hasn't noticed that the whole time his brother's been away, his dad has hardly ever smiled? Do you think he hasn't noticed that in spite of all the years of faithful and loyal and responsible work he's put in and in spite of the way he's made the business grow and prosper since he began running it, he's never once felt that his efforts were really appreciated. All those sighs that came from his dad, all the sadness wasted on someone who didn't deserve it. And that party says it all, doesn't it? That's what hurts. That's what is so deeply offensive. Sure he could bring himself to let his brother come back, maybe even back into the business at some lower level. Be magnanimous, sure. He could do that. But make sure the young wastrel knew that he was being treated better than he deserved. Make him earn his way back into the family's good graces. Forgive him, even, but never forget, and never let him forget either. Above all, don't give him a welcome-home party. That sends all the wrong messages. That's the real slap in the older brother's face. He never got a party for all his hard work and faithfulness. Don't his virtues count for anything?

Well, sure they do; they kept him from ending up rooting for half-eaten french fries in a dumpster outside MacDonald's. His hard work has given him a good life, and that's good. But it hasn't taught him the meaning of love. Somehow, I doubt if the older brother really knows what love is— real love that is so prodigal that it can reach out and joyously embrace the very one who broke a parent's heart.

But the father knows that kind of love. The father is the real prodigal in this story. He spends his love extravagantly and without distinction, even on those, and perhaps especially

on those, who least deserve it. *"Son," he tells his eldest, "all I have is yours; you've always been with me and always will be. But this, your brother was dead and is alive again. Was lost and is found. That's why we're having a party."*

What is there to say when faced with a love so prodigal that it embraces not only crooked politicians and corrupt CEO's and drug addicts and prostitutes, but even good respectable elder brothers or elder sisters, like most of us? Perhaps the only appropriate thing we can do is to let go of our virtues long enough to allow that love to embrace us and bring us in to join the party also.