

Year C, March 31, 2019
4 Lent
Christ Church, Mexia

"A (certain) father had a rather strong-willed son. On the way to the store, he kept telling the child, 'Sit down and buckle the seat belt!' But the little kid just kept standing in the seat. Again, he said, 'Sit down and buckle the seat belt.' After a time or two more, the boy was convinced he had better sit down, or disaster would strike. So, he slipped down onto the seat, snapped the seat belt closed, and said, 'Daddy, I'm sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing on the inside.'" (Vance Havner, *The Best of Vance Havner*) We are a rebellious lot! Always have been...

In the garden, which we refer to as the Garden of Eden, we, humanity, only had one rule, as far as I know. "You may eat freely of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat..." (Gen 2:16b-17a) One rule! Well, we all know how that story ended.

And we've had difficulty ever since, with some notable exceptions. Noah, for example, was a righteous man. And he and his family were spared in order to take care of the animals and restart creation after the floods to purge the earth. And for a time, things were better. But we are a rebellious lot!

And God found Abram, a man not so rebellious by nature, a righteous man who wanted to do the will of God. And God chose him to build and lead a nation of people who would be God's chosen people - a people who would live according to how God wanted life to be on earth. But we are a rebellious lot! In fact, a whole section of the Bible is devoted to the Prophets, who are mostly confirming our rebellious nature and ways, and calling for us to return to God.

So, it should come as no surprise, especially to those of us who have had teen-aged children, that a son, whom we have become content to refer to as the "prodigal son" over time, should show up in one of Jesus' stories in rebellion to his father and the customs of that day. But the story has a happy ending because the son finally realizes the error of his ways and returns to the father. The Prophets would rejoice.

And it is this reunion, this reconciliation, that I would like to focus on now. "...while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Does any of that strike you as odd? It surely must have gotten some reaction in the first century. Fathers didn't act like this. They were the head of the family – almost omnipotent in authority; running to meet any child would be unseemly at best, and especially one who had demanded his inheritance early and then squandered it. This is a culture that believed blindness or physical illness or other bad things that happened to you were caused by your sin. You got what you deserved! How would this story where the "sinner" is welcomed in such a way, given clothes and a ring – a symbol of kinship and position restored, the killing of the fatted calf – reserved for the most special of occasions, be viewed? How could people of that time conceive of such an event? It may even seem strange to many people today. Is that justice? And what about the good brother?

Jesus tells this parable after being accused by the religious leaders of the day for hanging out and eating with sinners. That is not the way it is supposed to be! Or is it?

What does Jesus reveal about God, his father? God loves us so much that God is always watching, and when we turn back to God, no matter what ridiculous things we may have done, God doesn't just wait for us, God comes running to meet us – to show us, love. God is so happy to have us back in a relationship that God does seemingly ridiculous things to welcome us. God's grace is unbelievable!

Is it possible for us to be like God in welcoming back the sinners among us? Can we hang out with them or the marginalized of society, invite them to eat with us? According to William Barclay: "Once President Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious Southerners when they had finally been defeated and returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take a dire vengeance, but he answered, 'I will treat them as if they had never been away.'"

It may seem difficult to emulate God's ways. But can we emulate President Abraham Lincoln? The Church should be about reconciliation.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit. Amen.