

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship  
March 14, 2010  
Anita Rediger

### From Now On...

Many of us enjoy looking at old pictures; old pictures of other people, that is! It is such fun to go back in time and look at the ways we have (others!) “grown” and “developed” over the years. It is delightful to be reminded of the new faces which have joined our families...through marriage and birth. It is bittersweet to see faces which no longer are present to us...because of geographical distance, death and divorce.

At Swiss Village, it is always great to have opportunity to see old photographs of our residents. The beautiful monochromatic pictures of the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the classy clothing...the elegant hair styles seem to have a different quality to them than the ones of my early years. I grew up as a child of the 60's and 70's. Need I say more!? With long, stringy hair, strange-colored “pant-suits”- double knit, of course and to top it off - braces on my teeth...big plastic glasses...and complexion issues of a teenager...truly in these old pictures – now fading color pictures – one sees a child “that only a mother could love!”

The love of a parent for a child can truly be a marvelous experience...when Paul writes to the Corinthians, “from now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view,” I am reminded of a parent's love of a child. What a wonderful thing it is to have a glimpse of God's love for us when we consider the ways that our hearts stir when we think of our children – even if they are to others...“nothing special” or “unlovable.” Our hearts burn with love for our children even when others disregard and despise them.

The gospel text for this morning is a story addressed to a group of disgruntled people. The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling because Jesus was “welcoming sinners and eating with them.” In their eyes, Jesus was behaving inappropriately by recognizing the humanity of these “tax collectors” and “sinners.” (How much easier to discredit these persons by giving them labels instead of names!) It seems that the Pharisees and scribes are saying, “Jesus should ignore these outcasts and pay attention to proper people like “us” instead! We're the ones who are worth something!”

Note in the bulletin the way the gospel reading is written. It doesn't simply begin with vs 11, the start of the parable, rather it gives us this context of the ones to whom Jesus was speaking. Two other stories directly in response to the grumbling precede this capstone story of “the lost son.” (lost sons?) Surrounded by this critical crowd, Jesus tells three stories: a story about a lost sheep (and its value) even though there are ninety-nine others, a story about a lost coin – even though the woman still had the other nine. She even goes so far as to light a lamp – using costly oil to search for the lost coin! Both the shepherd and the homemaker call their “friends and neighbors” to celebrate with them when the lost is found! These two stories flow seamlessly into one another. Story #3 follows in a

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bit of another way, “**then** Jesus said... there was a man who had two sons...” Animals, possessions...sure these are things that get away from us, which we misplace...that’s the way it is with animals and things.

Still, how delighted we are when these lost things “show up!!” A child, however, is something else all together! Before Jesus continues, there is a pause. I imagine him looking intently at his critics. Now, Jesus’ is really going out “on thin ice.” Each of them/us had/has a family. Each family has a story. Each family story has “dynamics!” Each family story had/has its place in their/our community, in their/our culture!

Revisit the setting, “now, all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to him to listen...and the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling...” All these folks were drawn to Jesus and as a result were drawn nearer to one another than seemed comfortable. Now, EVERYONE is listening but listening from vary different vantages points. They’re hearing Jesus together! Jesus surrounded by tax collectors and scribes, Pharisees and sinners said, “There was a man who had two sons...”

The story tells us of the shameful actions of the younger son toward his father. By requesting his inheritance the son was actually saying to his father, “Father, I wish that you were dead.” In the honor/shame culture of the Middle East what a gross insult! The shameful behavior only gets worse. Any self-respecting father would have admonished the son, but the father allows the son his decision. Now, the father is getting drawn into “bad behavior!” But then, the son then does the utterly unthinkable – he sells his portion of the land – not only the source of the family’s livelihood but the ancestral gift of God to those who had wandered so long in the wilderness! Next, the son goes off to pagan places and squanders everything. Surely now, the good Jewish father will come to his senses and consider this child “as good as dead!”

That’s not the way it was, however. Even though the young son had “traveled to a distant country and lost everything” his father hadn’t disowned him. His father hadn’t cut him off as a child. His father hadn’t given his son over to the darkness of the grave. Instead, one day, “while the son was still ‘far off’.” (the same adjective as “distant”) his father saw him making his way back home. The son hadn’t sent a messenger or a letter to tip off his father that he would be coming home. There wasn’t a travel itinerary available to keep track of the scheduled arrival. Amazingly, while the son was still “far off his father saw him and was filled with compassion.” (invite focus on the Rembrandt print) How could this be? How could this happen? How was it that the father recognized his son after such time and trama?

The father - looking and longing, for who knows how long– recognized his beloved son long before anyone else took note of his figure on the horizon. Consider this for a

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moment: the son certainly wasn't dressed in his usual clothing. He's been living among the swine and is nothing but a bag of bones. He must have looked like a bum, a frightening crazy man approaching the town. However, in spite of the utter ruin of his young son's appearance, his father recognized him. In spite of the young man's devastating image, his father recognized him from a much deeper place than simple outer appearances, he saw him through the eyes of unconditional love.

In a flash, the esteemed father- breaking all convention of custom and cultural- took off at a run. The little narrow streets of the Jewish village most likely were filled with people going about the duties of the day. How shocked they must have been to see an aged member of the community defying "the rules" of propriety and pride. Grown gentlemen simply DID NOT run or hurry. Lesser individuals were the ones who were required to scurry about – servants or slaves and the like. Grown gentlemen in their flowing robes COULDN'T run and if they did they really dishonored themselves! In order to run in a robe, one would have to "hike" up the robe. Bare skin would show! Ones legs would be visible – such shameful behavior on the part of a Palestinian Jewish father!

Perhaps it was the father's own robe which was thrown over the son's nakedness – it was the "best one." It is evident by the father's actions that the return of his son is far more important to him than cultural mores and even what had been consider up to this point as accepted religious practice. The homecoming of the child mattered more than convention and "what others would think." Instead of slinking home with his son along the back streets, the father calls for a feast, a great banquet. (Luke 14 motif of the wedding banquet).

However, just like the factions drawn to Jesus and gathered around him, the father returns home to tension between his two beloved sons. A great banquet is given, but the elder sons says, "If I can't have the place of honor...I'm not coming."

Again, the father – the loving father – bears more humiliation – this time at the hand of his older son. By refusing to attend the celebration, the older son also shames his father. The older son, now just like his little brother did so long ago, treats his father with disrespect. This defied the expectations of first-century Jewish culture – those gathered around Jesus would have been keenly aware of this disgraceful behavior. Yet, just as the father reached out to his younger son who was lost, so too, did he reach out to the elder son, who was in danger of becoming just as lost as his brother. The father abandoned his guests, breaching etiquette, in order to persuade his older son to join the celebration. The father longed for and looked for his sons – both of them, all of them...

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We all know that our experience with or as earthly fathers may be very different from the one in this wonderful story. As we've listened to this story, I imagine that all of us have found ourselves thinking about our own fathers. Some of us have had fathers whom we have accepted us just as we are. Others of us have had fathers who wished we would have been "something" or "someone" else. It may not have been possible for them to truly welcome us "home." Perhaps, right now, those of us who are parents, might be struggling with our role in a child's life. For me, this adds only more "good news" to Jesus' words. Even though the story may inspire us in our parenting, this parable is a story of the Kingdom. It's a window into the character of God. It's the promise that God loves us and watches for us and celebrates our homecoming as we recognize our need of His care and nurture.

It's about God's live-giving love and endless mercy -no matter where we've been or how we've disguised ourselves. For us as Emmaus Road Mennonite, it's an invitation to be "father" to one another; the body-of-Christ for everyone who longs to truly come home – bare to the bone, true self exposed. We can offer to one another – in the name of Jesus – a place to truly be ourselves, a place of unconditional love, a place of healing and hope, reunion and resurrection.

We don't know how the story ends. We do not know if the older son came to accept his father's invitation to celebrate. To those listening to Jesus speak, it seems that he is asking the Pharisees and scribes if they are going to join him in rejoicing over God's gracious mercy to all persons or if they are going to remain bound up in their resentment, seeking to protect their "turf..." afraid that they might "lose" something if others are welcomed.

The Pharisees and scribes seem to want a God who associates with those deemed worthy. (by their definition.) Last week's text gave us a look into the disciples' concept of God. As they sought to "make sense" of the death of fellow Jews – at the hand of Pilate and as a result of the collapse of the tower of Siloam, Jesus responded with these challenging words, "...do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Jesus says to us – all of us - unless we "repent," that is turn from our understanding of God as a vindictive, condemnatory, merciless God *we will all perish*. The family of God does not thrive when this attitude steers us. The body of Christ is broken again and again by our alienation from one another when we seek to determine who's good and who's not. Wherever we stand in the circle surrounding Jesus, "from now on..." may we celebrate that in Christ everything old has passed away, there is a new creation! "From now on, may we regard no one from a human point of view – even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way – we know **one another** no longer in that way! How different we suddenly look to each other! Flaws

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and foibles fade from the spotlight and we become aware of the image of God in the other. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given TO US the ministry of reconciliation!

Yes! I see a new world coming! A world where everyone is welcomed home! And where those already home run to prepare a festal meal. So cue up the music and the let the dancing begin! Let's call our neighbors and friends to celebrate with us! Even if you aren't sure...come anyway and be taken by surprise! AMEN