

LENT4.C1  
Robert Farrar Capon  
The Parables of Grace  
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4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT  
March 14, 2010

Joshua 5:9-12  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11:32

### **Luke 15:1-3,11-32**

15Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." <sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable:

<sup>11b</sup>"There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" <sup>20</sup>So he set off and went to his father. But 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. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup>Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has

devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

It is difficult to put a good construction on death. Human instinct seems to find death unappealing. Nevertheless, as Christians, what we have to offer the world is the Gospel...and the Gospel starts with death.

Without the resurrection of a dead Messiah there would be no Christianity.

The hope of the Gospel is triumph over death. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "For whoever has **died** is free from sin." (Romans 6:7)

Christianity is often attractive on the surface because a lot of nice folks seem to believe it. There is a strong emphasis on morality and education. Christianity has a lot of good rules that are good for society. But at some point people take a look at the message and realize there is a lot of talk about dying.

The resurrection happened after Jesus died. Our life with God begins after *we* die. Not when we stop breathing, but when these sinful lives that do not seem to be going anywhere - when they die. When we realize that we will never be able to keep our rules well enough to generate our own life. The sin in our lives; our demand to set our own directions, our self-congratulations; everything that seems to make life worth living. All that must die.

All of that can die on the cross. But death does not sound like a good idea. The cross does not make sense.

Paul recognized that problem. He wrote to the Corinthians, "The message of the cross is sheer folly...we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross; and though this is an offense to Jews and folly to the Gentiles, yet to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The Gospel we proclaim is all based on the foolishness of death. If you like the life you have now, Christianity does not have much to offer you. Some good advice, very nice people to associate with, a long tradition of holiness...but not enough to sacrifice everything for. And sacrificing everything is the demand of discipleship. If you like the life you have now, discipleship may be too much to ask.

But if you want more than the life you have now. If you want to make your life part of God's creation, and spend the rest of your days the way God wants you to be, that will be a new life. Redemption to a new life happens after death. This life will die.

Human instinct finds death unappealing.

This morning's Gospel lesson is the famous story of the prodigal son. I wonder if it would be so popular if everyone knew that it is really a story about death. (Death, as I have mentioned, is unappealing.)

Everyone knows the story, but look at it again. Jesus, the man whose death is the foundation of the Gospel, tells this story about death and the good news it brings. The first death in Jesus' parable occurs right at the beginning. The father, in effect, dies. He has two sons and the younger one comes to him and says, "Father, give me my share of the property." In other words, he tells his father to put his will into effect, to drop legally dead on the spot. Obliging enough, the father does: he gives the younger son his portion.

Next, of course, Jesus tells us that the younger son went to a distant country where his rich boy's life turned rapidly into a lost cause - "...he squandered it in dissolute living." We are free to supply any specific forms of dissolute living that appeal to us for the sake of the story. But, whatever the details, the upshot of this part of the parable is that the younger son finally wakes up dead. Reduced to slopping hogs for a local farmer, he comes to himself one morning and realizes that whatever life he had is over.

Having introduced death into the parable a second time, Jesus gives some attention to the way the prodigal son faced death. Jesus sits the prodigal down by the hog trough to take a long look at his life and find...nothing. "How many of my father's hired servants have more food than they can eat", he said, "and here am I, starving to death!"

Before we can accept death as any kind of good news, we have to take an honest look at the life we are in danger of losing.

And so, in desperation over the end of everything that could possibly be called his life - the son formulates the first version of his confession: The son says, "I will go at once to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your servants'."

"Treat me as one of your servants." He will settle for being a servant. That is the kind of confession we usually say. We will serve our way into our father's house. The boy is still unable to admit that he is dead. He may understand that he has died as a son, that he has lost all claim to status as his father's loyal child. But what he does not yet see is that, as far as his relationship with his father is concerned, his lost sonship is the only life he had. There is no way now for him to be anything but a dead son. He comes up with his own plan, his own direction for a quasi-life for himself – a life as a servant.

The life his father had given him is gone. He thinks he can make up his own life as a servant. The son thinks that his father will go for that, because the son thinks the father will settle for less than a restored son. He thinks his father has no more hope for him than he has for himself.

Listen to what Jesus says next. "So he set out for his father's house. But while he was still a long way off his father saw him, and his heart went out to him; he ran to meet him, flung his arms around him, and kissed him." The boy is being embraced as a son - and he knows that as a son he is dead. The prodigal suddenly sees that he is a dead son, that he

will always be a dead son, and that he cannot by any efforts of his own become a live anything else. And he understands too that if now, in this embrace, he is a dead son who is alive again, it is because his father was willing to be dead in order to raise him up. His father was willing to embrace a boy who could only be a son.

And so the prodigal makes his confession for the second time, but this time in the embrace of his father. He says, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son." Period. No "hired-hand" nonsense. No attempt to serve his way back into his father's house. He can never be anything but a son. **Dead away from his father. Resurrected in his father's embrace. But a son.**

What the parable is saying first of all is that, as far as Jesus is concerned, repentance involves not the admission of guilt or the acknowledgement of fault but the confession of death. I quote from Robert Capon: "Confession is not a medicine leading to recovery. If we could recover - if we could say that beginning tomorrow or the week after next we would be well again - then all we would need to do would be apologize, not confess. We could simply say that we were sorry about the recent unpleasantness, but that it's all over now. But we never recover. We die. And if we live again, it is not because the old parts of our life are jiggled back into line. It is because some wholly other life takes up residence in us. Grace does nothing tit-for-tat; it acts finally and fully from the start."

And that brings us to the second thing the parable is saying: as far as Jesus is concerned, all real confession - all confession that is not just fudging the books but is a plain admission of our death - comes *after* forgiveness.

Only when, like the prodigal, we are finally confronted with the unqualified gift of someone who died, in advance, to forgive us no matter what, Only then can we see that confession has nothing to do with getting ourselves forgiven. Confession is not a transaction, not a negotiation in order to secure forgiveness. It is the after-the-last gasp of a corpse that

finally can afford to admit it is dead and accept resurrection. Forgiveness surrounds us all our lives. We confess only to wake ourselves up to the forgiveness and resurrection we already have.

All of which takes us right to the party. The father puts no intermediate steps between forgiveness and celebration. There is none of that "Well, you are forgiven; but let's see some good behavior now to make the deal stick." Here is the way Jesus tells the story, "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Fetch a robe, the best we have, and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast. For this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.' And the festivities began."

If we sum up the parable so far it would be nothing but good news - death and the gospel, hand-in-hand. The father, the prodigal, and the fatted calf have all died and two of those three have been raised to new life and they are having a party. As Jesus put it, "...the festivities began."

But the story is not over. Jesus knows that human instinct does not find death appealing. In comes Mr. Respectability – the only live character in the parable. The Elder Brother. He approached the house and heard the party and when he found out that the celebration was because his brother was home it made no sense to him at all. Jesus said, "But he was angry and refused to go in." The prodigal son was dead and, in the older brother's view, death is not to be celebrated.

As Jesus tells the story, the older brother gets an audience for all his grouching about lax standards and the need to keep the household in good order and how unappreciated he is. Jesus said, "His father came out and pleaded with him;..."

Since the father has been the very embodiment of grace with the prodigal son we have a tendency to read this as more tender concern. But grace only works on the dead. The

older son refuses to be dead. He will hold on to what passes for the life he has cobbled together out of rules and responsibilities and the rest of what Paul calls the "death of the law". And the father can only wave the free saving grace of resurrection in front of his older son like a judgment. He says, "We're all dead here and we're having a wonderful time. You, on the other hand, are alive and miserable, and standing outside when there is a party going on in there." In Jesus' parable the father does the classic comparison between the two brothers and guess who gets the favorable comparison? "Your brother here was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found."

This classic parable of grace proclaims clearly that grace operates only by raising the dead. Those who think they can make their lives the basis of their acceptance by God will wind up standing out in the yard.

The last judgment will vindicate everybody for the simple reason that everybody will have passed the only test God has, namely, that they are all dead and risen in Jesus Christ. Nobody will be rejected for having a bad life because nobody there will have any life but the life of Jesus. God will say, "You were dead and are alive again; you were lost and are found."

If at that point, someone wants to try proving he really is not dead...well the yard has always been full of such people. People who stay outside and say the message of the cross is sheer folly.

God has a new life for you. His direction, his hope, his creation. He has already died and he embraces you with a new life that can only be given to his child.