

“The Foolish Embrace” 3/27/22
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 Rev. J. Koyama

The Masterpiece

This week’s Gospel, the Story of the Prodigal or “Lost” Son is a one of the masterpieces of scripture. Although, in some ways the story is simple and straightforward, there is so much in it, that there is no way to do justice it. It is like a multifaceted diamond that rewards your vision any way you look at it.

The Embrace

For me, the dazzling high point is the embrace between the father and his son. The father has not seen his wayward son for a good while and when he sees him coming up the road, he has options as to how he will handle this long awaited moment.

He can take a measured approach and question the boy to make sure that he has learned his lesson, maybe put him on a probationary period before taking him back in or... he can express what he is truly feeling in his heart, which is the desire to run and jump into his sons arms and throw a big party. *But* the way the story is told, it doesn’t seem as though he puts any thought into his response at all. His true feelings just take over.

Apparently Foolish

Commentaries tell us that this behavior on the father's part, rushes out to embrace and kiss his son would have been viewed in the ancient world as behavior beneath the father's dignity; that he should, at the very least, have given his son the opportunity to show the proper respect that the occasion called for; a show of respect which the son had actually prepared himself to make. The father's behavior would have been seen as foolish, his appearance rather ridiculous.

But apparently the old fellow couldn't help himself. A son whom he loved had returned and his joy at seeing him just took over. His love for his son overpowered his usual sense of composure.

When I think of this moment, it reminds me of those schmaltzy scenes at the end of romantic movies where two lovers rush together and embrace in slow motion. "Oh John!" "Oh Marsha!" with lush violins playing to a climax in the background. (I guess they don't do that in movies any more. It's seems too sentimental for today's hardened audiences).

But I think there is a good reason why old movies used to end with those kinds of feel good scenes. It is because these moments of embrace express the culmination of what is most deeply heartfelt for us. They become markers of some of the most important moments in our lives.

The things that Prevent this Embrace

But, as we know, those moments don't always come easily. Life has a way of putting a hard shell around our hearts that is not easily cracked and many things can come to stand between us and our ability to embrace each other.

In the case of the Father in the story, the expectations of others might have caused him to feel self-conscious and to decide not to embrace his son. Or, he might just as easily have been overcome by righteous anger at his son's previous ingratitude and felt the desire to punish rather than embrace him.

And in our own lives too, there are so many conflicting emotions and understandings that can cause us to hesitate or pass, when the opportunity presents itself to embrace the people we love most. And so, rather than risk appearing to be awkward or foolish, we often choose the lonelier path.

My Own Father

My own father was not a “touchy-feely” guy. He lost his dad when he was a boy and was never very good with kids. And although he had deep emotions and attachments, he did not express them publicly in a touchy feely way. You know how some guys are. They express affection by talking about how the gutters around the roof need fixing or some other topic that points away from intimacy. He was sort of like that.

Some people, when you hug them, give you a vigorous hug back. But the few times I was able to hug my dad, his body would be kind of limp, because I think he just didn’t know how to load a hug with feeling.

One night, a couple of years before he died, we were visiting and everyone else but dad had gone to bed. I was sitting in a chair pretending to read, but really noticing how much older he looked. Dad was going about turning out the lights. He had a feeding tube sticking out of his stomach to bypass the cancer in his oesophagus.

I knew that there might not be many moments left in which we would share this world together and was suddenly overcome. I jumped out of my chair and ran over and grabbed him in my arms and sobbed, “ I don’t want you to die!”

You can imagine that he was caught completely off guard. And I think his immediate response was probably “has he lost his mind?!” After a couple of moments, he finished what he was doing and unceremoniously went to bed. But I am sure he took with him a sense of how profoundly and viscerally I loved him.

Because of this and other moments we shared, I am happy knowing that, although I will never see him again in this world, he knew how deeply I loved him. And perhaps he would never have known quite how much, had my fear of looking ridiculous prevented me from doing it.

It is a moment that stands out as one of the most important events of my life. And I think that the awkwardness of the moment and the appearance of ridiculousness is actually part of what gave the moment its power.

Universal Embrace

I think that this need to embrace is universal. It is the most direct physical expression of love and when our hugs comes from a place of honest treasuring, they are moments that punctuate and charge our lives; like exclamation marks. In those moments, heaven and earth are joined and the victory of God's love over all things is affirmed! They are what we call in church language, "sacramental" moments.

Church of the Foolish Embrace

When I started writing this sermon, I started out with the title, "The Church of the Foolish Embrace." One reason I like this title is because I think that some of the most important things happen when the proper or expected course of behavior is circumvented by hearts that forget the past in the rush to embrace.

Of course, I don't think that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is about rushing to embrace everyone under every circumstance. No-one should feel compelled to hug someone who puts them in danger.

But in some ways it is a disturbing story, in that the father comes across as a “push over” for his younger son. And the older son is quite aware of it and complains about it. And it is never entirely clear that the younger son is ever truly repentant or whether his return home is motivated by the same self-interest that caused him to leave home in the first place.

And so, if the Father’s embrace of the son is in some ways a Parable about God’s relationship with us, that moment of embrace tells us something about the depth and generosity of God’s love for us and about the depth and generosity of love which we should feel permitted to show each other; that God embraces us even though it is not entirely clear that we have repented and that we have the freedom to extend that “benefit of the doubt” to others.

Ambassadors of Reconciliation

The behavior of the father toward his sons in the Gospel story provides us with an example to help us understand our Epistle reading this morning, when it calls us to be “ambassadors of reconciliation.”

We are called as followers of Christ to bring people together, so that all can be reconciled with each other and with God. And as Christians that means we carry our own crosses and bear the pain of being hurt by others just as Jesus did and just as the father in the story did, in bearing the cross for his wayward son.

Consider the total lack of respect or gratitude the younger son showed his father in running off and squandering his inheritance. Imagine the sleepless nights his father endured, wondering whether he was alive or dead. And yet the father went on loving him. And seeing him from afar, was so filled with joy that he seemed to have no memory of any of these wrongs, but leapt to restore him to full participation in the life of the family.

It seems to me that many times, goodness happens, not as the result of carefully calculating our actions on the basis of past events, but when we are moved in such a way that we become forgetful of these calculations and do something that is completely free of them. Sometimes it is as though God slips in the back door and uses us for good, and we only recognize it in hindsight.

Conclusion

I am so glad that I hugged my dad that evening. I had the opportunity in this life to say “I love you.” And it happened in an unplanned moment of grace and in a way that left the meaning unmistakable.

My prayer for us today is that we will be a wise and thoughtful church in service of God’s ministry of reconciliation. But that we may also be overpowered by compassion and led to by the Holy Spirit to embrace those we never intended to embrace and live evermore in gratitude for the gift of that moment.