

“Wasting Away”
March 14, 2010

Psalm 32
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-24

It doesn't seem fair, does it?

It doesn't seem fair that, in this not-so-picture-perfect family, the hard-working, faithful, and obedient one should get the shaft, while the demanding, reckless, and feckless one gets wined and dined. It doesn't seem fair that the younger son should get the best robe, some sandals, a ring, *and* a fatted calf as soon as he returns home, while his elder brother hasn't even gotten a skinny little goat during his long years of hard work. It doesn't seem fair that the father would give the *wild* boy the equivalent of a case of the best wine from the cellar, while never even giving the *responsible* boy the equivalent of a bottle of two-buck Chuck. Let's face it: it doesn't *seem* fair because it *isn't* fair.

And let's face something else: that unfairness bothers so many of us because we identify with the older brother far more readily than we do with the younger one. That unfairness is especially irksome because many of us in churches like this one think of ourselves as responsible, hard-working, and dedicated to doing the right *and fair* thing.

Churches are often filled with people who think they would never dream of doing anything like turning to father or mother and saying, in effect, “You haven't died soon enough ... and it sure doesn't look like you'll be dying anytime soon. I can't stand to wait any longer to get what's coming to me, so give me now what I think I should get when you finally do kick the bucket.”

Churches are often peopled with folks who find the younger son's behavior in this morning's reading so appalling, so *wretched*, that even though we know how the father will respond to that prodigal son's return, we keep hoping that maybe this time, the older son will get a little more appreciation and the younger son a little less celebration. We keep hoping that the responsible one will be rewarded a little bit more and the irresponsible one a little bit less. But the story never changes, at least not in how it's written in the Gospel of Luke.

At the same time, churches like this one – and probably all churches everywhere – also have within them people who have been as self-centered, as lost, and as reckless as the younger son, people who have, through God's abundant grace, been welcomed back into loving, celebrating human family. Here and elsewhere, members of faith communities carry within them – within us – the memories of being lost in addiction and destruction, stripped of a sense of self and self-worth by abuse, alienated from family in body and spirit. And, here and elsewhere, those same people carry with them the stories of being found by God's grace, filled with a sense of the Spirit's blessing, and embraced by a family of love larger than anything they had ever imagined possible. So maybe, after we have a little chance to think about it, some of us here are *grateful* that God's love, healing, and embrace aren't strictly limited to what would seem “fair” and “reasonable.”

Here in this church and in other congregations, “the people” – that would be you (and me) – bring a diverse mix of experiences and perspectives through which they encounter this story of a man and his two sons. Maybe you see yourself in one of these

three, or maybe you see yourself in all three. And, of course, you might see yourself in *none* of them. Perhaps you're unable to imagine yourself being as greedy as the younger son, as resentful and self-righteous as the older son, or as unfair and selectively extravagant as the father. There is certainly room enough in the story, in the Christian tradition, and in this congregation for all sorts of individual responses and reactions to this family drama.

But perhaps this morning we're being invited into the parable, not as individuals, but as a community, a society, a nation. Perhaps the good news and the challenge of the gospel this morning can come to us only if we're willing to ask where we are in this story as American citizens, citizens of a First World country in a world filled with Third World countries. Perhaps the Word of God can come through this familiar parable only if we are willing to recognize how fully we as a society mimic that younger brother *before* he "came to himself," while he was still living in a distant land, far from the loving embrace of true home, while he was still wasting away.

Let's try to imagine what we might look like to people from other parts of the world or other, very different parts of the American landscape. Let's try to imagine how much we might seem like the profligate, prodigal younger son to people who are as hard-working, as responsible, and as ignored as the elder son in the parable seems to have been.

Imagine you are a mother or father in India or Ethiopia or Mongolia or Haiti, a parent whose child isn't growing because there simply isn't enough food and clean water available to nourish an infant. Imagine being that mother or father and coming here, to this country, this small community, where we have not one or two, but *four* large grocery stores selling a vast array of food that nourishes and food that doesn't .. four large grocery stores selling an unending stream of different kinds of bottled waters. Imagine being that mother or father whose child's life is in danger from lack of food and water and strolling around Sonoma. And then imagine yourself wondering when this people of dissolute, extravagant living – these people living in Sonoma – will ever come to themselves, as the younger son did, and realize how far they have wandered from a home of generosity, simplicity, and perspective.

Imagine you're child in Afghanistan or El Salvador who has developed a love for learning and reading, and imagine being told that you can't continue to go to school because your family can't afford the equivalent of the quarter – 25 cents – it would take to get you to the school several miles away. Imagine being that child, unable to get to school for lack of \$1.25 per week, coming here, watching as so many of us spend hundreds and *thousands* of dollars each year on our pets, for food, treats, clothing, shots, and teeth cleanings. Imagine yourself as that child, wondering why these people in Sonoma spend thousands upon thousands of dollars for their pets – their dogs and cats and ferrets and rats – while your time in school has ended because your family doesn't have \$5.00 a month to pay for your bus ride.

Or imagine you're with me in Barrio San Jose in Nicaragua last fall, as a young man named Xavier, who has longed to have a pair of shoes of his own, asks me how many pairs of shoes I have, and imagine seeing the shock, amazement, and sheer bafflement in his eyes as I tell him I have at least 10 pairs of shoes. At least 10 pairs of shoes to take care of just two feet in a mild climate.

Imagine you're someone from any part of the globe who is not accustomed to how much food, water, wine, plastic, oil, gas, electricity, etc., we routinely consume here in Sonoma, here in the States. Imagine you're someone from any part of the globe who is unaccustomed to how often we in Sonoma and in the States get rid of, throw away, *waste away* food, clothes, furniture, books, clean water, and so much more. Imagine what we look like to those of our brothers and sisters whose lives are marked by material scarcity, not material abundance. And then be willing to ask the question. "Who do we most seem like in Jesus' parable of a man and his two sons?"

When we start to see ourselves in the younger son's profligate living, maybe, just maybe, we will hear echoes of an ancient prayer that our own hearts and mouths need to pray. When we start to see that who we are in the world parallels who the younger son is in Jesus' parable ... when we start to see ourselves in the one who demands what he thinks he's entitled to, even though he *isn't* entitled to it, and then wastes it all on himself, we may find ourselves joining the psalmist with these words:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me, and my strength was dried up as by the heat of the summer. And then I acknowledged my sin to you and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

When we see ourselves in the younger son, we may find ourselves confessing our sin as the younger son did, and then we may also find that our sins have been forgiven and we have been welcomed home with joy and an extravagant banquet.

(Now before you put too much effort into resisting and rejecting the very notion of "sin," hear liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez' definition of sin: A breach of friendship with God and with others. Can any of us here this morning truthfully say that we've never breached any of our friendships?)

In a world of hunger, poverty, lack of access to education, health care, hope ... we in the first world have been wasting away things that don't even belong to us. We have, in other words, caused a breach in our friendship with God and others. Whether we're aware of it or not, that waste is eating at us just as the younger son's waste was eating away at him.

We are called to come to ourselves, just as the younger son came to himself. We're called to turn our hearts and our bodies toward home. We're called to end our silence, confess our sins – to confess our wasteful ways. When we do that, we may discover with the psalmist that we are surrounded by steadfast love, and we may join the younger son in being welcomed home with far more generosity and joy than we have any right to expect. And then, maybe then, we will give thanks that God's ways go far beyond and far deeper than human notions of "fairness."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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