

Seeing God's Perspective

Proof reading can be an interesting exercise...because Brandy was not going to be in the office this past Monday I prepared two weeks of bulletins the week before. Sermon titles are always an interesting process as the idea is to summarize the major theme. When I went back and finished working on the order of service for today and typed in the sermon title I realized that the bulletin had a title that was a misprint or a typo from what I thought it was, but it may have been a better choice than I thought. The difference in the title was the spelling of the first word...In the bulletin it lists the title as "seeking" God's perspective while I thought I had entered the title a little differently; it was going to be "seeing" God's perspective—a difference of one letter, but a world of difference in what it means. Seeking is a process which implies uncertainty about what is being seen but continuing to pursue something; seeing implies knowledge, the goal has been achieved. I think the bulletin is closer to what should be our approach in all things theological, but using the scriptures as a guide, we can come closer to seeing...especially if we do what my seminary professors said we should do...we should find our place in the narrative to see if the teaching is to us, about us, or for us. Where are we in Jesus' message when we hear the words of Jesus' parables and teachings? In the parable which forms the main part of today's gospel reading our thoughts and actions probably fit at least partially into those of each of the main characters. This parable is taught to us very early in Sunday School, the images drawn from it are found widely outside of our church experiences. It is usually found under the title of the Prodigal Son...which if we examine closely the meaning of Prodigal, the adjective could apply to each character. Just as the grouping of this one with two others means it could easily be titled the Parable of the Lost Son which is the title given in Olney's Pew Bibles. And since the father's interactions narrated are with two sons...still another title could be used; it could be about the Father and two sons. We often limit potential insights by considering it as a separate teaching, forgetting the context in which Jesus offered this story of what would have been considered a very dysfunctional family by those who heard it. The passage is introduced by an observation about those who have come to hear Jesus and Jesus' response to them. "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." We then find this upsets the religious leaders of the day because according to Luke they grumble about it saying "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The passage does not tell us what course these "sinners" pursue after listening to Jesus and being welcomed by him. We know Jesus has been proclaiming a message that God's kingdom was near but preparation for its arrival needed repentance to occur so forgiveness could be received. The parables which are Jesus' response are directed not to the sinners but to the religious leaders. The first parable is about a lost sheep and the search for it and the joy when it is found. The second parable is a similar one about a lost coin. Both focus on the joy when the lost is found comparing it to the joy experienced by God when sinners repent. The last parable narrated for the benefit of those who grumbled about Jesus' welcome and sharing fellowship, that is, eating with sinners is much longer and more complex. We have a tendency to read the parables of Jesus as metaphors or allegories assigning each character a role; usually with the landowner assuming the role of God. This is often fruitful, but it may not convey all that we can glean from it. Here we might begin with this question: "Are we the Pharisees who stand at the beginning of the passage? This parable begins with the introduction of this family of a father with two

sons; each of which during the course of the narrative will behave in a way that is totally shocking for the culture. Jesus lived within a society that was held together by strict concepts of shame and honor—all actions were judged by their effect on the family. When the younger son is said to ask his father for his share of his inheritance it indicates a total breakdown in family relationships. In Jesus' shame-honor culture asking a living parent for an early inheritance is beyond rude; it was the equivalent of saying "I wish you were dead." The younger man's request would have shocked Jesus' audience, but not nearly as much as the father's response of accepting the request. Since the culture's economics was based on agriculture, fulfilling this request was not simply writing a bank draft; animals or property would have had to be sold. So it is not surprising that this process took some time and it was "a few days later the younger son gather all that he had and traveled to a distant country." This further highlights that he wants to break all familial ties. The text reads when he got to the distant country "there he squandered his property in dissolute living." There are no details about what constitutes this "dissolute living" in the text, but the usual image is that it is with wild parties, drinking and spending time with all types of immoral behavior. The Greek text uses the word (διασκορπίζω) which usually is translated as: *scatter, disperse, waste, squander*. The sense of the word is a lack of restraint; it is about being wasteful without any limits, but can be applied to either morality or economics—just wasteful spending. The implication about the moral aspect is injected into the story by the older brother's comments later in the narrative. Yet we rarely wonder how or why the older brother has made these judgments; nothing else is said about the younger brother's life except that his circumstances become dire after he has spent everything. To make matters worse in this distant country there is a famine and he begins to be in need. At first he seeks to provide for himself by going to work for a native of that land who sends him out to feed the pigs. For someone from a Jewish background this would have been abhorrent, not only because of the lowly position, but because contact with an unclean animal would have been prohibited by his faith. He is not receiving any charity and begins to be desperate enough to want to share the pigs' food. Under these conditions it is not surprising that he begins to think of home and all that he left behind. The text tells us that at this time "he came to himself." This coming to himself is expressed in the text this way: "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." From this statement the interpretation is usually that this young man is repentant, that he is remorseful. Yet the text does not actually say he felt repentance; only that he realized that his father's hired help fared better than he was doing and gives us a plan for how he would re-introduce himself into his father's household. Having outlined his plan of action, the young man sets off for home. When he is still not quite home, but was "still far off", the text informs us that his father saw him coming. "His father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Again, this behavior is out of sync with the culture it is describing. No one of authority would act in this manner...The younger son is returning home as a failure; he has reduced his status and shamed his father by working for an unclean man feeding pigs. These things shame and reduce the father's status as well; yet here the father is thrilled to see his son; he ignores the cultural norms and runs to welcome, embrace and kiss his son even before he can apologize. The son does make the apology but it comes after he has been

welcomed home lovingly. The younger son may have been prodigal with his inheritance, but the prodigal love of the father covers the filthy son with honor and love. The father's servants are ordered to clothe the returned son with the best robe, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Additionally a feast is prepared with a fattened calf sacrificed to celebrate the return. The father proclaims the reason for the celebration: "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" The prodigal love of the father goes against all of his cultural expectations; yet that love dominates. This readily ties in to the conclusion of the previous parables about the rejoicing over the lost being found. However, although we like to believe the young man was repentant, the text is not clear on that, nor is repentance part of the previous parables. Repentance was certainly a major theme for Jesus, but when speaking to the Pharisees who would not have acknowledged they had any need for repentance, the focus has altered somewhat to focus on the love which compels forgiveness and acceptance. And although we often end our thoughts on this parable at the celebration, Jesus has not yet finished with the narrative. Jesus talks about the elder son's response to his brother's return. He is angry because his father has killed the fattened calf which traditionally was kept for important events such as weddings. In fact, he is so angry he refuses to attend the celebration thus distancing himself from his family. The father leaves the celebration to plead with him, but the elder son argues with him and describes himself as a slave to his father, revealing a host of resentments; perhaps also fearing that his inheritance will now be reduced again. However we judge the younger son's motives, still the story retains a deeply scandalous flavor in the father's exuberant response to his returned son. The father welcomes home a loser, as a loser, and restores him to his standing as a son. All he had to do was to come home. The elder son's reaction makes the parable especially complex and interesting. The elder son is alienated; no one bothered to call him in to join the party; he no longer address his father as "Father" and speaks to him about "this son of yours" thus denying his kinship with his brother. Why is the older brother resentful? He has been taken for granted and feels unfairly treated because he has not been celebrated. He has just been there doing what needed doing. This son cannot see the situation in any way but according to his own conventions of justice. His father's response to the younger son utterly confounds the rules, doctrines and convictions that confine the elder son. Is the older son justified in his response? By his own standards, he is. And many of us need to realize that deep down we tend to reckon things in similar ways, according to similar standards of fairness and belong. Yet the father again does not do the expected. He does not cast the elder son away. The parable denies a zero-sum economics that would have one child accepted and another rejected. For the father still calls the elder son "son" and confirms his full place and favored standing within the family. The parable ends before it is seen how this son will respond. This is always a compelling parable because we are never only one of the characters. Who among us has not at some time squandered the friendship and love of another that we have been given? Who has not felt fear or insecurity over the possibility of being left out? Who has not resented what is perceived as unjust or unfair treatment when seeing someone receive unearned benefits? Or who has not worked and just felt their efforts were not noticed or appreciated? Who has not at some time felt self-righteous over their behavior compared to another? There are so many places that we can see ourselves in this narrative. There is a parallel here to be drawn about God's love that covers both sons. The Father who was the one most sinned against by the younger son, freely reconciles with him.

The Father then reminds the older son, that he is loved. The older son's anger is not on behalf of the wrong done to the Father but about his concept of what he and his brother "deserve" because of their actions. The parable tells us that the love of God reaches out to those who sin, desiring their return; it even reaches out and offers that love to those who have not acknowledged their sin. Remember, this set of parables started out speaking to those who criticized his welcome and fellowship with "tax collectors and sinners, those folks religious people don't spend time with....we don't know if those folks with whom Jesus spent this time repented or not; Jesus responded to their need and spent time with them. He also took time to reach out to the Pharisees and scribes who felt they had no need for repentance. This parable has several places where we can see ourselves. The question is when we find that place or those places, do we seek God's perspective about us....God's perspective here seems to be a love which can surmount all things and desires to joyously welcome those who come home; and invites us to share that welcome and joy. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.