

Pastor Roy's Sermon from March 6, 2016 (4th Sunday of Lent)

Imagine a son or daughter asking for his or her inheritance before a parent dies. And imagine the parent that would give *everything* away. . . Now the parent is dependent on the child. **So this parable is not just about a child who wastes his inheritance. This is a father who throws himself at the mercy of his children, one son runs away and wastes his ancestral gift, the elder son is possessed by his inherited ancestral gift.** You see, in those days, one did not acquire wealth during one's lifetime, one held on to what was passed and then in turn, passed it along. Your inheritance was passed to you so that you could pass it along. Anyone who acquired sums of wealth was a thief and a robber.

So this story is one of a crazy father and two messed up sons. But the younger son comes back to his senses. The elder son wishes the younger were dead and acts as if he were.

Is this not a parable of love? Indiscriminate love—freely, with abandon, not calculated for a certain response or result. Here is love as a deep well of kindness. If love depends upon a certain response, then it is down-payment. Something given in exchange for something received. That is not love. Surely love, at its heart is indiscriminate, freely given, freely received.

In this parable the father's heart is broken twice. Once by the younger, immature, careless son, and again by the elder son, hardened, consumed with care. Yet the father's love persists. Will those who love always have their hearts broken? Or does love find fulfillment in something besides getting one's own way? Those who love give power away. Love gives life. Love nurtures. Love is an expression of maturity and invites maturity.

(Now, I am not talking about allowing others to abuse us psychologically or physically. Gracious love will continue to love the abuser or neglector even though it must step back and create loving boundaries. Boundaries protect the one who loves and the one who is loved from destructive patterns of relating.)

One of our favorite expressions of mature love is that of mothers. This parable of a father and his sons seems to leave out women. But let's take a second look. This father is not only unusual but impossible. **Really, what father in Jesus' day would ever give his financial responsibility over to his sons while he was still able to make the decision? Yet virtually every mother who became a widow fell into this situation.** She would have to divide her husband's property between her sons while she is still alive and be at their mercy for her livelihood since she was not allowed to hold property. **A dishonorable choice for a father was the cultural norm for a widow. Hmm.** Might Luke and Jesus be subtly questioning this well established, unquestioned pattern which persists quietly to this day?

So what we have in this parable is a father who voluntarily assumes the plight of a widow. **Do you think they might be challenging our assumptions about power and faithful love?**

And the powerless love of this father succeeds in winning over the younger son who realizes that his best hope is as a day laborer with his father. He needs nothing else. He hopes for nothing else. He realizes now what he has done but there is a shred of relationship left and he believes his father will employ **every** morning he shows up to work. That's humility borne of

reality. The younger son has let go of any power he once had, because he realizes that power is no longer his. Now he receives whatever might be offered. No demands. No expectations. Just surrender. The younger son now understands love and mercy. He can now receive.

What about the elder son? Will he be won over by the love of the father? Will he learn that all is his? **Will he learn to share what is his, with his brother who now has surrendered to the family with no rights, no expectations, only need and love much like the father did years before?**

Could it be that Jesus and Luke are inviting us to this kind of love? A love which lets go of the power we **imagine** we have over others? A love which is as vulnerable as a first century widow or an accused criminal naked, dying on a cross?

Does this parable challenge us to consider that depending on power is a dead end street which leads nowhere? Does it invite us into the freedom of releasing what we cannot keep for the joy of receiving what we cannot lose? Mercy. Love. Peace.

Likely all of you practice this vulnerable love more often than you realize. Sometimes you might even feel guilty that you are not exercising your power as you might. Our instincts and society tell us we should maximize our power to control people and situations all around us. If we don't, we are being irresponsible.

And yet, do not such choices separate people? Do they not spin off all kinds of loss and hurt and suffering? Power crushes, mercy invites and lifts.

Is not vulnerable love **the** path into freedom and joy, as painful as it **will** be?

Consider, as we travel with Jesus toward Jerusalem, how might we choose the path of vulnerable love based on faith in mercy, and how might we reject the path of power based on fear?

Consider. . .