

October 14, 2018
21st Sunday of Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“The Road to Emmaus”

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Luke 15:11-20 (21-32)

Then Jesus [told this story], "There was a man who had two sons. 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. 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. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. 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! 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."' 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.

We know the rest of the story: They kill the fatted calf. The older brother gets mad. The father tries to calm him down by explaining his actions.

Revs. Susanne Carter (S) and Ken Jones (K)

Pods and a Fatted Calf

K:

If you have ever been part of a Bible Study group, you might have experienced, with some surprise or even shock, that different people hear different things in the same text. How can he or she get THAT meaning out of this passage?

If we believe that the scriptures are the LIVING Word of God, then it shouldn't astound us that each one might connect in a very personal way to a certain Bible story. How a text is heard and understood depends very much on the life experience of the hearer. This insight has been reinforced for us by some research done by Dr. Mark Allen Powell¹, professor at the Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio.

S:

Let us see whether we can repeat one of Dr. Powell's experiments here this morning, with some slight adjustments. I will summarize the first part of the story of the prodigal son, and you tell me, whether I left out anything significant. Please listen - and do not cheat by opening a pew Bible.

Here is the summary:

The younger son asked his father for his share of the inheritance, and then he went off to a far country – but when he got there, he squandered all the money, and pretty soon he was broke. So he got a job feeding pigs and was so hungry that he wished he could eat the pigs' pods. He finally came to his senses and started out for home etc. ...

Is anything important missing from my summary of the beginning of the story? If you think so, would you please call out the missing detail ... (congregational input)

Our biblical text says in verse 14, **"When [the young man] had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need."**

¹ as published in the Gather Magazine for Women of the ELCA during February through April 2018, as well as in his book What Do They Hear?, Abingdon Press, 2007.

When Dr. Powell had 100 Lutheran seminary students in Columbus retell the story from memory, only 6 mentioned the famine. 94% were, as he calls them, "famine-forgetters."

The way these students heard the story, and the way most of us are used to hearing it, is this: a sinful boy squanders his father's hard-earned inheritance by wasteful living. Thus, he gets into big trouble. He finally comes to his senses and repents. It's a story about sin and repentance and, if we look at the rest of the passage, also about forgiveness.

K:

Dr. Powell had a chance to spend some time in Russia, and he decided to run the same exercise with Lutheran seminary students in St. Petersburg.

He again read the parable of the Prodigal Son to 100 seminarians, then asked them to retell the story from memory. To his amazement, 84 out of 100 remembered the famine, compared to only 6 of the Americans. What accounts for the difference?

In 1941, there was a 900-day siege of St. Petersburg by the German army. Some 670,000 people died from starvation. At the time of Powell's research, some survivors still lived in the city, as did many of their descendants. The experience of famine was and still is very much in the memories of people in St. Petersburg. So, it is not surprising that the students there would remember the mention of famine in retelling the parable.

In the same exercise, only 34% of the Russian seminarians remembered the part about the boy squandering his resources before the famine hit. Apparently, that part did not mean so much in their context. Prof. Powell asked them, "Aren't we supposed to think the boy in the story did something wrong?" "Of course," they said. But the issue was not how he spent his money. His mistake was leaving his father's house in the first place. His sin was taking his inheritance, moving away from his family, and thinking he could be fine on his own, without the help of others. For these Russian students, the meaning of the parable was primarily about the importance of community in the face of disaster, not about how one spends or loses money. The boy cannot be held personally responsible for the famine. But he is guilty of trying to go it alone.

It's not that one meaning is better than the other. The American meaning – that this is a story about sin and forgiveness is not any better than the Russian meaning – that the point is the importance of family and community. The parable mentions both: the personal squandering of resources, and the arrival of a famine in the land. Which part seems most important, depends on the situation of the hearer.

S:

And things get even more complex. Dr. Powell also regularly spent time in Tanzania, East Africa, again working with Lutheran seminarians. After a reading of our text, he asked a room full of them, why it happened that the young man ended up hungry in a pig pen. Dr. Powell was curious to find out whether they would answer, "because he wasted his money" or "because of a famine." Some of the students mentioned one or the other of these meanings when retelling the story. But 80% focused on a different reason: the boy was hungry because no one gave him anything to eat.

And here it is in our text, as we read it before (verse 16): **[The young man] would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.** End of quote.

When questioned why anybody should give anything to a guy who squandered his money, the Tanzanian students considered such a view callous. There is this naïve immigrant boy who doesn't know how things work in this foreign country, and so he loses all he has. And whether it was his fault or not doesn't really matter. As Christians, we are supposed to care for the alien and the stranger in our midst and practice hospitality.

But that couldn't be the central meaning of the parable, could it? The Tanzanian students insisted that the text is about the Kingdom of God, symbolized by the house of the young man's father. The far country is a society without honor, one that doesn't care for the down and out. Jesus told the parable, they pointed out, after some opponents challenged him. Just a few verses before our text in the same chapter of Luke's Gospel (15:2), we read that **the Pharisees and the scribes "were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'**" Did Jesus tell the parable in response to these accusations? Was it his main point to contrast a society which does not care for those in need with the Kingdom of God where all, even the undeserving, are welcomed at the table and fed the

food served only at grand banquets. This would not be the only time that scripture uses the image of a rich feast to describe God's vision of the abundant life (like, for example, in our First Reading).

K:

Perhaps the Tanzanian understanding of care for the stranger offers something to think about to both Americans and Russians, to Americans who hear the parable as a message about sin and repentance, as well as to the Russians who focus on the value of family and community.

Three meanings for the same text: care of strangers, sin and repentance, value of community. It is perhaps safe to assume that none of us here would have come up with these three by ourselves.

I have an example of how risky it can be when you read Scripture all by yourself, or with only like-minded people. In 2004, Susanne and I were present at the meeting of the South African Council of Churches. On that occasion, the white Dutch Reformed Church was being welcomed back as a member. The DRC had been expelled from the Council of Churches years earlier because of its theological justifications for the racist policies of apartheid, policies which completely dehumanized people of color, many of them Christians, in cruel and vicious ways.

In his remarks in 2004, the Moderator of the DRC, Dr. Coenie Berger, confessed to two grievous errors on the part of his church. Their endorsement of apartheid had been sinful, he said, but the biggest error of all had been their belief that they could read and understand the Bible in isolation from other Christians.

It is an error easily repeated in other contexts, including our own. Different people will find different meanings in the Living Word of God, and we deprive ourselves of a fuller truth by listening only to our own voice.

S:

Thanks be to our brothers and sisters in other places on the globe, and to those right here in the next pew over, who expand our understanding of and deepen our insights into the Living Word. Amen.