

March 14, 2010 - Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. [PDF] (Joshua 5:9-12; 11 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Luke the evangelist has skillfully related Jesus' telling of the parable of a father and his two sons. Let's hear that story again, only this time without a text since Jesus didn't read these stories, he told them.

Once there was a father who had two sons. The younger of the sons came to his father and said, "Father, you're pretty much as good as dead to me so why don't you give me the inheritance now?" And the father did as his son asked and he divided his life's work, his life's savings between the two sons. The younger son took his share and went away to a foreign country far away and squandered it in extravagant and loose living. And just about the time when he ran out of money, the economy tanked, and there was a famine and there wasn't any food and there weren't very many jobs. And the younger son began to be in need. The only job he could get was taking care of one of those foreigner's pigs in a field which was about as defiling as one could get for someone like him, being a child of the covenant with God, taking care of those filthy pigs.

But at some point he hits rock bottom. And he comes to his senses. He comes back to himself and he says, "What am I doing here? I would love to have just a few of those carob pods that I feed the pigs but nobody gives me anything. I could go to my father. I could work for him as one of his hired hands and at least have a little something to eat. I will go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned before heaven and before you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Treat me like a hired hand.'"

Not only did he think this, he actually did it. He got up and he went home. Found his way back. And while he was still a long way off from the house, his father sees him coming. And his father, a man of great status and stature, didn't walk with great poise. He ran. He ran across the field and threw his arms around his son's neck. He didn't care what it looked like. And the son tried to get out the words, "Father, I have sinned before heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Please, just hire me as one of your servants." But the father is not listening. He's busy speaking to the servants, "Quick! Get a robe. Get a really nice robe for the boy. Put it on him and get a ring so that everybody will know that he is my son. Put some sandals on his feet. And while you're at it, that calf that we've been fattening up for the festival, for the really, really special occasion, we're going to have a barbecue." And the servants did as they were told and a great celebration took place.

Now, the older brother had been out working in the fields all day. He comes back and he hears the sound of the celebration, the music and the partying. And he speaks to one of the servants, "What's going on?" And the servant replies, "Your brother has come home and your father ordered the fatted calf, the one we were saving for the really special time, to be killed and we're having a barbecue because your brother's back safe and sound. Isn't that great?" And the brother is very angry and refuses to go into the party. The father hears of it and comes out and says, "Please, come in, come in." But the older son addresses his father this way, "Listen here! I've been working like a dog for you for years. I've been following all the rules. I've been on the straight and narrow. You didn't even give me so much as a goat to go celebrate with my friends.

And now this son of yours who's been squandering half your life's work with prostitutes comes home and you slaughter the fatted calf?" The father says, "Son, you've been with me this whole time. And you'll still get all that I have. Your whole share of the inheritance. But we have to celebrate because that's your brother in there. He was dead to us, but now he is alive. He was lost, but now he's found."

Lost and found. The words of the parable found their way into the famous hymn "Amazing Grace." "Amazing grace, amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see." Some of us may cringe a little at the word "wretch." Are we really wretches? It's not a word we really use much anymore. We're not that wretched, are we? And we may likewise resist the phrase that we heard in the parable from the younger son, "I am not worthy." There's the prayer of humble access that we pray right before communion during Lent where we say, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table." And it sounds kind of depressing. I mean, do we really need to focus so much on how sinful we are, how unworthy we are, how wretched we are? Lent has this bad reputation of being a time when we're supposed to groan about far we've wandered from God. Lent...it's so terrible. Lent..."God, you really would be within your rights to banish me to farthest reaches of fire and Hades, but please don't." Lent...How does that help us really?

Perhaps we resist phrases like "wretched" and "not worthy" because they've been used so often to put others down. Those Pharisees and Scribes that have gathered around to listen to Jesus along with the sinners and the tax collectors, those Pharisees and Scribes are pointing and grumbling as if to say, "These folks are not worthy. They're not worthy to be with Jesus because they've betrayed God and their people." And we've heard similar voices say, "These folks are not worthy because they don't have enough money. And these folks are not worthy because they're the wrong color. And these folks are not worthy because they're the wrong gender or they love someone of the wrong gender. These folks are not worthy because they're too young or too old."

We resist the words "I am not worthy" because we don't want to cooperate with those who oppress and exclude. We don't want their words in our mouth. We want to say, "We are worthy. We are all worthy. Don't try to put anyone down." At the same time, we might resist the words "not worthy" because for the last several hundred years in this western part of the world we've been taught that we are indeed worthy. We have certain inalienable rights - liberty, life and the pursuit of happiness. It's a part of our philosophy. It's a part of our kind of understanding of who we are that we are worthy. As citizens of the United States of America we're taught that we are worthy of being in the greatest, most powerful country on earth. Worthy of being first, worthy of being the ones that everyone else looks up to. Because we've learned that we're worthy, whether it's because we're Americans or some other status that we hold, why should we deny it? Why should we put ourselves down and say we are not worthy?

Being worthy is a heavy burden to bear. We say we're worthy, then we've got to maintain it. We have to protect our appearances so that others will not question us. And being worthy means then it's harder to ask for help. Weakness and vulnerability are not qualities of someone who is worthy. And there have been people who have caused and endured great suffering because they did not want to appear weak or ask for help. Worthiness is heavy.

Worthiness also has a tendency to harden our hearts just like those Pharisees and Scribes who wanted to point fingers at the sinners. Just like the older brother in the parable who's so proud of himself, he's so worthy. He's worked so hard, he's followed all the rules, he refuses to be happy that his brother is found. Worthiness makes it hard to love. But still, do we really have to say, "I am not worthy"? Well, no one forced the son in the story, the younger son, to say, "I am not worthy." At some point he realizes that his choices have taken him completely away from himself, his family, his faith. At some point he comes to his senses and realizes he could have a better life being unworthy. He could have a better life as a servant in his father's household.

Now, in the beginning of the story he must have been feeling pretty worthy to go to his father and say, "Well, you're pretty much dead to me. Give me the inheritance now." To break ties with his family, to squander his resources on luxuries. But he finally comes to a place where he sees that his worthiness has only brought him hunger. His privilege has only brought him pain. So he finds his way home and says, "Father, I am not worthy to be called your son." He's not putting himself down. He wants to be free of this pigpen. He wants to be fed. He's not degrading himself. He's trying to live. What he doesn't realize is just how generous his father is. Rather than hire him as a servant, his father brings him home with a party. That older brother still stuck in his worthiness. He's been working like a slave, he says. He's been trying to earn his father's love. He doesn't realize that his father has already given it to him. And so he refuses to enter the party because he hasn't been treated fairly. He rejects joy because he'd rather sulk in his self righteousness and worthiness. He'd rather be right than happy. Does that sound familiar?

At some point we can come to our senses and say to God, "I'd rather be unworthy and live. I'd rather be happy than right" in my own mind. When we say to God, "I am not worthy," we are saying, "Lord, I'd rather be serving you than stuck in the pigpen of my messed up plans." We can say, "I am not worthy" with joy because it's a wonderful thing to lay that burden down. Thank God I do not have to be worthy. Thank God I get to confess all my junk to a compassionate and loving God who promises to forgive. We do not have to be surprised at how generous and extravagant God is when we repent. We can depend on it. And when others try to point the finger and say, "You are not worthy," we can say, "You know what? None of us are, so quit acting like you are."

Lent, therefore, is not a time when we beat ourselves up. The joy of Lent is the joy that we do not have to be worthy. By confessing our sins we are lightening our load. Lent is not about making ourselves suffer more or feel guilty. Lent is the time when we take an honest look at how much we suffer because we are slow to admit how great God is and how fragile we are. Say it with humility, "We are not worthy." Say it with joy. We do not have to be worthy. "Lord, we are not worthy," but we are willing and we know that a celebration is being planned and we know that we are all invited.