

Fourth Sunday in Lent

IT'S JUST NOT FAIR-YOU-SEE

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Analysis by Bill White

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 11b So he told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 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. 13 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. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 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. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 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! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' 20 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. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your

son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-the best one-and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his elder s on was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Author's Note: There are three excellent "crossings" of this parable in the "Text Study" archives of www.Crossings.org . Hence, I thought I'd attempt a crossing of this text from a slightly different angle, i.e. identifying the Pharisees and scribes in Jesus' audience as the "persons with the problem."

DIAGNOSIS: Lost and Dead

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Observation as a Guide to Judge*

The Pharisees and scribes have a problem. They are upset and

grumbling because they have observed Jesus welcoming and even eating with (!) tax collectors and sinners. So they voice their criticism. "If Jesus were a true man of God he would not be hanging out with those kinds of people. He certainly would not be eating with them; He would know better! There is definitely something wrong with this picture!"

So also, some of us "religious folks" judge the Christian credentials of others by observing whom they welcome and sit with at the table.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Trusting in the Law to Judge*

Underlying the Pharisees' and scribes' grumbling and criticism is an even worse problem. The source of their judgmental attitudes and actions is their misplaced faith, i.e. their faith is in their own knowledge of God's Law and in their ability to interpret and apply God's Law: "There are laws, Jesus, about what is clean and unclean, about what is right and what is wrong. We know the Law. We keep the Law. And we can certainly see when someone is breaking the Law. When you receive tax collectors and sinners at your table, when you break bread with them, it is a sign that you fully accept them! Obviously, Jesus, you condone their behavior!"

And perhaps in our own backyard: "Did you see those people over in the pew by the piano Sunday? Who let them in? And pastor gave them communion! If pastor really cared about our church she would not be encouraging them to come here. Letting bad folks like that mix with all of us good people is dangerous to the religious and moral fiber of our church. Think of the kinds of negative influences they will have on us! You know what they say, "Birds of a feather flock together! It's just not right to condone those kinds of people. It's just not fair-you-see."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Trusting in the Law to Save*

Worse still, if these scribes and Pharisees continue to trust in their ability to determine who is lost and who is found, who is dead and who is alive, if they continue to trust their ability to interpret and keep God's Law in order to save themselves, then the very Law they are trusting to save them will condemn them. "Oh God, I thank you I am not like them! I have been loyal. I have kept your Law. I have kept myself ritually clean." And God says, "Oh, really? Are you sure you want to go there? Do you want me to take a careful and close look at all of your thoughts, words, and deeds from the very beginning of your life? Do you really want me to judge you in light of my 600-plus laws? Although it may not seem fair-you-see, these Pharisees and scribes are actually the ones who, apart from God-in-Christ, are lost and dead.

This kind of misplaced belief is also deadly for our congregations and us. "Thank you God for giving us the wisdom and knowledge to know what's right and what's wrong. We know it's not right to receive those people into your church and welcome them at the Your Table. We know it's not fair-you-see. We'll fix it; we will execute your justice in this place." Can you hear the voice of God, "Oh, really? I don't think so..."

PROGNOSIS: Found and Alive

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Trusting in Christ to Save*

Fortunately, God is not fair-you-see. God is more-than-fair, so much so that this Jesus who receives sinners and even eats with them is in fact God in the flesh. And God-in-Christ does for humanity what they cannot do for themselves: God-in-Christ fulfills the demands of the Law. Jesus the Christ is on his way to Jerusalem where he will suffer and give his life on a cross,

where he will die and rise again, so that all who believe in him may be saved from sin and the demands of the Law, the forces of evil, and death. Incredibly Good News!!!

“Oh God, your Law has shown me I’m just like everyone else, like every other sinner. Please Lord, do not judge me according to your Law, but according to your Gospel. I’m clinging to the promises of Christ to save me...”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting in Christ to Judge*

Moreover, the crucified and risen Christ now comes to offer God’s love and rescue, God’s welcome and forgiveness, God’s amazing grace, to all-everyone from the worst tax collectors and sinners to the most self-righteous Pharisees and scribes. Jesus comes to rescue and receive the lost, to welcome the Pharisees and scribes with the free offer to exchange his righteousness for their self-righteousness, to exchange true faith for their misplaced faith, to exchange his life for their death. By faith in Christ they are now free to let Christ decide how to interpret and apply the Law, to let Christ be the judge.

The God-in-Christ who is more-than-fair also gives us faith to trust Jesus’ judgment about who should be welcomed and sit at the Table. “I know it is often difficult to distinguish, but you know, there is a difference between forgiving and condoning. Jesus isn’t condoning the lifestyle of tax collectors and sinners, he is offering them forgiveness and new life. Trust him.”

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Observation as a Guide to Welcome*

As good as the news is that by faith in Christ Pharisees and scribes are now saved from the power of sin and judgment under God’s Law, the news is even better. Empowered by the Holy

Spirit, these Christ-connected sinners change their behavior. No longer do they decide who is good and who is bad, who is clean and who is unclean according to their own observations. Now Pharisees and scribes welcome tax collectors and sinners and, I know you'll find this hard to believe, they eat with them!

"Please, won't you come and join us? We have a place at the Table for you right here. Please know you are welcome here."
"Hey wait, you invited those people?" "Yeah." "But it just doesn't seem fair-you-see." "I know; isn't God's grace amazing?!"