

Runnymede United Church
The Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 14, 2010
'Now Quit Your Care'
Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

'Outdo, out-connive, out-bamboozle - out!' The imperatives of so-called 'Reality TV' permeate television shows like *Survivor*. If you can't keep up, you're out. Being rejected is reality. See who survives, who wins!

It's Laetare Sunday, Lent's fourth Sunday whose ancient name comes from the Latin, meaning 'rejoice', or, loosely translated, 'lighten up'. Tradition says this Sunday offers a moment of relief in the otherwise serious season of Lent.

'*Now Quit Your Care*' we sang: a different imperative from 'Get out'. *Reply, with love, to love most high*. The father rejoiced from the moment he saw his younger son walking the long road to the house. *His heart went out to him*. When Jesus told his parable, two worlds collided. They still do: out-do, out-vote, out-resent, on the one hand; out-pray, out-accept, out-love, on the other. What is 'reality'?

A parable: a professor once likened Jesus' parables to a cartoon of people gathering around the Information Board in a newly opened shopping centre. They were looking at one of those charts that show you where everything is: a colourful floorplan, listing all shops both by letter and number, according to genre. Pet stores: OK, where do I find 'Pets'? But something's wrong. The crowd lifts its arms, looking perturbed. Furrowed brows. Annoyance. Frustration! The problem? No red arrow announces: 'You are here!'

Parables are like that. Parables are like maps, with a clear design, but the red arrow is omitted. There's lots of helpful detail, but the question remains: Where am I? Where are you?

The late French theologian Henri Nouwen tells a story about many levels on which this parable of Jesus may function. When he toured the Hermitage Museum in Russia, he saw Rembrandt's painting of 'The Prodigal Son' hanging in a hallway, bathed by natural light from a nearby window. He stood, gazing, for two hours, as the sun shifted, and every change of the light's angle revealed a different aspect of the painting. He later wrote there were as many paintings in 'The Prodigal Son' as changes in the day.

What painting do you see? It may be difficult to view something new in this parable. After hearing a story many times, we tend to believe we've squeezed all meaning out of it. If you're like me, you've identified with every character in the story, except, perhaps, the fatted calf! I have been the rebellious younger son, impatient to leave home in search of the far-off and different. I wish I'd not been the local landlord, sending a youth to deal with the pigsty's putrid stench, without just compensation. But, at times, I've tried to exploit another's weakness. I've certainly been the dutiful, resentful oldest child, and the parent, waiting for someone to come home, hoping, worrying. Does the changing light show you those characters in yourself?

The parable suggests Jesus was addressing a world not so different from our world and its 'Reality Television'. Either one of these sons would have voted the other out of the family. Time's shifting light reveals *Survivor* behind the story Jesus told long ago. Out-connive, out-resent: Get *Out*. But Jesus shines another light into that world: Out-love, out-accept: Get *In*.

Now, the parable doesn't tell us what will happen. What do you imagine? Does the older son listen to his father and join the banquet, or remain, choking back anger with a can of beer, in the barn? Did the homecoming work on the younger, or did he again become bored, borrow the car and drive to Niagara to play blackjack in the Casino, have a fling? What about that father? Would he be tempted to throw up his arms in despair and kick them both off the farm?

Or is that last possibility difficult to conceive? Whatever light bathes this story, the love a parent shows for two difficult sons is compelling, if bewildering, to people accustomed to *Survivor*. Familiarity dulls the point. But look at that painting. See it afresh. When part of *Survivor's* fascination arises from the way it presents the act of voting 'out' through almost religious ritual, we need to hear Jesus' story anew.

Luke's 15th chapter begins with complaint: Jesus eats with sinners. The story is motivated by people who regularly vote others 'out'. Jesus aims at those who find reasons to reject others, who live, teeth clenched, refusing to believe that *"the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind"*. (VU# 271)

Jesus tells this parable in response to religious leaders complaining that he welcomed sinners. He tells it to those who think they possess the answers, who cannot *quit their care*, who devote *anxious fear and worry* to who should be out, who could be in. Are they different from us? Luke shows Jesus wanting them - good people all, dutiful, devout - to see the world in a new light, to perceive how different life could be if they opened themselves to the surprise, *the wideness of God's mercy*. Light changes the focus of the parable: instead of delinquent sinners in need of forgiveness see the self-righteous saints who think they have a corner on God's grace.

How much of the Christianity we practise is like the elder son, full of piety, purity, judgment? How much do we emphasise the right kind of behaviour, whereby anyone who doesn't fit into our scheme of things is judged unfit, undeserving, *out*? Can we suffuse ourselves with the light of God's blessing, and see the mystery and wonder of this story, our *legacy of grace*?

In a world hooked on *Survivor*, can we understand grace, God's mysterious, other, mode of survival?

If the father had regarded his sons in the light of 'reality television', both would have been 'out'. Neither would have received anything. Each one of them has serious character flaws! That's the point of the story. This dad says to both his children, 'I know you and I will not put you out. I will give you what you don't deserve.'

What sends the father running down the road *with calf and robe and ring (VU# 112)* ready? Certainly the prodigal did not expect that, though he dared hope he would not be voted all the way out. But shining in the centre of this story is mystery, the wonder of God's love. It is not shining on the way of duty or righteousness, nor even on the sin of letting down those who love you. It is not shining on repentance or forgiveness, though both are there. This light does not illuminate only justice, or even the triumph of love over human weakness.

Rather, shining at this story's heart is radiant affirmation: the *wideness in God's mercy* is more than all of these. If the journey home to God were under our own steam, under our control, it would be futile. I would always be voted *Out*. You would have no place. But God's light shines on a different reality. Love *so true and deep* says: 'You are *In*.'

'These are our sacred stories', we dare to claim. In that light, we are a different people, not survivors, something else.

The light shining through this story paints love so radical and sweeping it has sometimes generated astonishment and other times, sputtering outrage. That light calls not only for us to recognize God's mercy, but also to be the grace God has already placed in our reach, given us. Grace never votes us *out*, but asks that we vote others *in*.

That light says true survival means acting in weird and wonderful ways, like throwing a party for a delinquent child, stretching out your hand to those others have judged and found wanting.

Now quit your care, the light beams: *Reply with love to love most high*. Reply: when you allow that radiant radical richness to wrap around your life, you know you can spread it to another life, to the life of the world.

The light of grace moves through this story. Forget out-do, out-think, out-vote. Remember: Out-care, out-accept, out-love.

May the wonder of God's grace fill our hearts, as we consider what survival in God's world means. Amen.

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