

Epiphany Episcopal Church  
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The Prodigal Son  
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Last week, Patty and I visited the Bible Museum in Washington. We were in D.C. for a wedding and our hosts had arranged a tour of the museum for some of the guests. Our docent took us through exhibits on the history of the early writings of the Bible and contemporaneous events at the time – for example, comparison of the ten commandments to the laws in the Code of Hammurabi. He told us that manna – reported to be eaten for the last time in the first reading from Joshua today – is literally translated, “what is it?” The docent walked us through exhibits showing the Bible’s translation from Hebrew to Greek to Latin, and finally to English and German. One room of particular interest featured the Bible’s journey to America at its earliest beginnings. The state of Maryland was founded by Lord Baltimore as a haven from religious persecution in England.

One of the aims of the museum is to show the influence of the Bible in and on the world. This included, at the end of our tour, an exhibition hall of biblical impacts on architecture, design, fashion, the arts, literature, government and politics. It was here I came across an exhibit of six words in a setting of deep historical significance. The setting was the Washington Mall in August 1963 and the words were from the Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson: “Tell them about the dream, Martin.” The setting and these words were the pivot for Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous speech. In a similar way, the setting today – Jesus speaking to tax collectors and sinners and the Pharisees and scribes complaining about it – was the pivot for the parable of the Prodigal son. Let’s start with Dr. King.

When King arrived in Washington the night before the march, he and his aides argued about what should go in the speech – jobs and housing discrimination were among the topics discussed. Dr. King then dismissed his advisers and wrote out the speech longhand. He finished in the early morning hours of August 28, 1963 and gave the speech to his staff to type and distribute to reporters. The speech did not include the words “I have a dream.” Later in the afternoon, while King was in the middle of delivering his address, Mahalia shouted out to him: “Tell them about the dream, Martin.” Dr. King looked at her, put down his prepared remarks, and spoke of his dream, using words from the prophets Amos, Isaiah, and the Psalms. Here are a famous few:

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

Dr. King had this dream inside him – he had spoken about it on occasion before – but he was not prompted to tell it until he heard the words of Mahalia Jackson. Jesus presumably had the parable of the Prodigal Son inside him but was not prompted to tell it until the moment he was speaking to tax collectors and sinners and heard the words of the Pharisee and scribes: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." It is this setting and these words that provide the context for the now-famous parable.

"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.' The father agreed and 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, he resolved to go to his Father, confess his sins, and ask to be treated as one of the father's hired hands.'" He set off and went to his father, but while he was still far away, his father saw him and ran and put his arms around him. When the son tried to confess his sins, the father would not let him. 'Quickly,' he told his servants, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'

What is missing in this story? Forgiveness. The word forgiveness is missing, and the action of forgiveness is missing. The son wanted to be forgiven, wanted to work as a hired hand, but the father was having none of it. The father immediately began to celebrate the return of his son. The parable of the Prodigal Son is not about forgiveness. It is about judgment. "Judge not," Mathew 7:1 instructs us. The father does not judge his son. He gave him his share of his inheritance to spend as he wished. When he comes home, his father welcomes him back. There was no need to forgive because there was no judgment in the first place. Think back to the context of the parable: the Pharisees and scribes were judging Jesus and the tax collectors and sinners who were listening to him. Jesus was telling them – is telling us – that God judges no one who returns home to him.

Think about this. God gives each of us life, a share of the Creator's inheritance. It is not for us to judge how other people live their lives. It is not for us to judge and yet – think of how often we do. We judge one another. We judge our husbands and wives, our parents and our

children. We judge our bosses at work, our teachers at school, our neighbors. We judge family members who think differently than we do. We judge the way people dress, how they speak, how smart they are. Our politics are politics of judgment. Patty and I have been discussing recently turning down the noise of the news every day. The news is not the noise – we need to follow and live and seek to understand the world around us. The noise is the judgment, the constant nattering of sides taken up against one another, the words of condemnation and life-draining dialogue. The world sees the world and judges, yet we who follow Jesus are not the world. We are in the world but not of the world. St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians nails it: “From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view.” We are ambassadors for Christ. Christ did not judge the sinners and tax collectors who came to him. Nor should we judge the people who come into our lives.

We judge ourselves also, and often, harshly. We look at our lives and see where we have fallen short, and judge ourselves wanting. We look back and think, we could have done this, or should have done that. The psychologist Jung writes, “What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all beggars, the most impudent of all offenders, yea the very fiend himself – that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness, that I myself am the enemy that must be loved – what then?” Jesus answer is the youngest son in the parable. Howsoever we may judge ourselves, God the Father only wants us to return home.

There is one more story of judgment in the parable today – that of the elder son. Coming home from the field hearing music and dancing and realizing that his father was

celebrating his brother's return, the elder son becomes angry. 'Listen!' he says: "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. The father replies, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was lost and has been found.'"

Why is the elder son part of the story? Three reasons. First, the elder son's point of view, from the human standpoint, resonates. His younger brother made a mess of his life and he gets the fatted calf? The older brother is faithful to his father and receives no special reward? The older brother's anger makes sense to us. Second, think back to who is listening to the story: the Pharisees and scribes. The elder son represents the Pharisees and scribes. He is that righteous part of us that thinks that we are living rightly and deserve more. Jesus' response, through the father's reply to his elder son, is that we have already been given a share of the inheritance. Last, the story of the elder son pivots us further away from the human point of view. Rather than grumble and judge about what other people have and do not have, ours is to be grateful for what we have been given and the good that comes to our fellow human beings.

As Mahalia Jackson's words brought forth Dr. King's dream, the words of the Pharisees and scribes brought forth the Prodigal Son – a parable not about forgiveness, but about judgment. As the father did not judge his son, as Jesus did not judge tax collectors and sinners, so we should not – shall not -- judge one another. How about it? How about if we accept our lives as ambassadors of Christ and, from now on, regard no one from a human point of view?

How about if we resolve to see without judgment, live without judgment, and love without judgment?" How about if we start now?

Amen.