

The Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C: Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

March 31, 2019

The Rev. Scott Walters

I don't mean to brag, but there's something I happen to be really good at. I'm really good at not being wrong. You can ask Ardelle. No matter how at fault I might seem to be in a situation, there's always a fuller explanation, mitigating circumstances, another perspective from which the case for my innocence is entirely convincing. At least to me.

Anybody else out there really gifted at not being wrong?

The only person I know who might be even better is my friend since childhood, Steve Ruble. After college Steve and Jeff Anglin shared an apartment in Fayetteville. Jeff had a nice road bike that he'd let Steve borrow sometimes. Steve would remove the front wheel, and throw the bike in the back of the beautiful blue Toyota Celica hatchback we all envied, and he'd drive to the path where he liked to ride.

Now, if you haven't really been into bicycles since you were seven, you might not know about quick release hubs. A decent bike will have a little lever which can be flipped up, so the wheel can easily be loosened and removed from the fork. This detail is relevant to the story because Steve would often come back from his ride, remove the bike from the car, and slip the wheel back onto the front fork without tightening it down in order to roll it up the sidewalk to the apartment.

Well, one day Jeff decided to take a ride straight from the apartment. And when he came to the train tracks nearby, he did what cyclists instinctively do. He slowed down only slightly, and pulled up on the handlebars so as to soften the bump. And when he did, he watched his front wheel leave the bike and roll off across the tracks and down the street without him.

Jeff fared slightly better than his bike in this spectacular crash, somehow breaking no bones, but the road rash and bruises were considerable. And a few days later, when Jeff told me the story of what happened, Steve said, with a shrug, "Well, if you'd checked the wheel before you rode, none of this would have happened."

It was then that I realized I was in the presence of a true master of self-justification. The statement was unassailably true. It will tell you something about Jeff's mellow disposition to hear he did not respond by pounding Steve until he looked like he'd gone face first into a train track. No, a familiar smile spread across Jeff's scuffed up face, as if to say, "Well... what can I say?"

Anybody else out there really good at not being wrong? Anybody else really good at justification?

Justification. That's a big, religious word. It's been a big word in Christian theology at least since St. Paul. It's actually a central theme of the Bible from the earliest moments of Genesis. How are sinful, imperfect, fallen human beings justified before God, if we can be?

But like so many other big, religious words, we tend to let them run around only with other religious words. As if our minds were made up of little dog parks where like species play only with like.

So, even if we use a word like “justify” or “grace” or “faith” with regard to our everyday dealings with other people, it’s as if it’s just a curious coincidence that there are words that look and sound just the same that we use in church and apply to our dealings with God.

But what if we’ve gotten this wrong? For instance, have you ever wondered whether justification by grace through faith might actually have something to do with the many ways we justify ourselves to one another? Maybe even with the ways we justify our lives to ourselves?

“Listen!” said the older son, “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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

Ah, yes. The parable of the Responsible Son. Remember it?

Now, I happen to be an eldest child. Clearly Jesus had reviewed the latest birth order research before composing his parable. We first born ones do seem to have a tendency to be extra responsible and diligent, as if the need to prove our worth is a little more intense than it is in those younger siblings whom our parents were so much easier on. The ones they would spoil to the point of letting them gallivant around with pigs and prostitutes but they wouldn’t even let us eat pork rinds when we were little and our dating life was monitored more closely than the crown jewels.

Some years ago, I read an article that said elite universities were actually considering quotas on first born children because their hyper responsible habits got them bizarrely overrepresented in the classes they admitted. Quotas. So that’s why I didn’t get into Stanford.

Not that we’re resentful. Or rather, not that we’re resentful...for anything but the soundest of reasons. After all, we’ve been justifying ourselves meticulously for our whole lives and then somebody up and changes the criteria for goodness. How fair is that?

I hope you can appreciate our frustration before you, too, accept the cheap grace of the open armed father in Jesus’s annoying little parable.

Unless this very frustration... unless this familiar resentment is precisely what learning that I am justified because of who God is, not because of what I’ve done, is meant to heal.

In the parable, it is telling that the father disputes nothing in the older son’s case. Not really. Saying, “everything I have is yours,” is not the same as saying, “I’ve thrown the best party money can buy just for you!” The father disputes nothing in the older son’s careful justification of his worthiness. Not the hard work. Not the perfect obedience. Not the lack of even a goat party for his friends. The father disputes none of this.

It just breaks the father’s heart that his own child thinks he has to justify himself at all. It breaks his heart that his child thinks a father’s joy and his affection must be earned, and that all the responsible son’s efforts at goodness over the years had been a kind of performance to do just that.

The older son in each of us may need to feel the father’s sadness at a child who thinks his acceptance is conditional. We may need to feel this sadness if we’re to be changed by the parable of the

Responsible Son. Because what we are probably used to feeling toward the older son is judgment, not compassion.

But his resentments and self-justification are no less worthy of our compassion. His brother can't believe he's worthy of the father's unconditional embrace as he sits in filth with the pigs. But the older brother's habits of mind keep him just as distant and sealed off from the true affection of the father. And they will only be healed if he can learn to trust that the father's love depends completely on who the father is, not on either son's moral performance.

Maybe the healing needed by both sons is essentially the same.

Each week at this table we remember and celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. We participate in it and receive its grace in the sacrament of his body and blood, saying that the justification of our sins depends on this mystery.

This truth can seem much too eternal and abstract to make much difference in my life today. But the older son in me is coming to see that every time I justify myself to you, to the world, even to God, I deny that the wide open arms on the cross are what my ultimate justification depends on. Which is tragic, not because God is offended by my bad manners or my ingratitude. But because to live in a universe in which we are justified by what we do for ourselves is nothing like living in one in which we are justified because it is simply the nature of God's arms to be open.

Does it not make great sense then, how faith, how belief, how trust in the mercy of such a God could heal, even save your very soul right now?