



**Lent 4, Year C – March 14, 2010**

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham**

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, the nineteenth century German philosopher, is well-known for his pronouncement that God was dead. One might occasionally still see a bumper sticker that says "God is dead – Nietzsche" or the counter bumper sticker, "Nietzsche is dead – God." Now we would be disinclined to agree that God is dead. And as believers in eternal life, we must admit to the possibility that Nietzsche is not really dead either. How do we wrap our minds around that? The question left hanging at the conclusion of Luke's Gospel this morning offers us some useful insights, though not, perhaps, a complete or completely satisfying answer.

The story of the prodigal son is one of the most familiar in the Bible. And the family situation and dynamic it portrays are not unfamiliar either. Many have known or suffered the antics of a prodigal child, one who abandons family and faith and embraces a prodigal – that is, recklessly wasteful – lifestyle. Yet, we can sharpen the edge of this story by placing it in the context of Jewish life, law, and custom in the first century. And when seen metaphorically, as Luke intended, the story blossoms into a profound lesson in God's love and compassion. And how we should respond.

Under Mosaic law, a younger son was entitled to one third of his father's estate. The older son would be entitled to two-thirds. But only after the father had died. So when the younger son demanded his inheritance early and for no good reason (like, for example, he was getting married), he was essentially telling his father what Nietzsche said about God. "You, Father, are dead." And, indeed, the father figure in Luke's gospel does represent God. And to compound the offensiveness of declaring his father dead, the younger, soon to be prodigal, son, sells the inherited property for cash, and goes to a Gentile land. He not only has nullified his relationship with his father, but abandoned his identity, ethnicity, and religion as a Jew. The cord is cut. The bridge is burned. Undoubtedly, he had no thought of ever returning.

And for a while at least, he had a fine time of it. But his spendthrift and dissolute ways and a famine catch up with him. He is left to tend pigs – something abhorrent to Jews. If he had any religious scruples left, they were now completely lost.

But as is so often the case, when we have declared God dead, when left to our own devices we have hit bottom, when we have nowhere else to turn, we come to our senses, and like the prodigal son who "came to himself," we return to who we really are. But we feel unworthy, like the prodigal son, who felt he could make no claim to be his father's son. He had pronounced his father dead and severed that relationship.

Still, he would journey home, acknowledge his wrongdoing, seek forgiveness, and hope to be treated as a hired hand. For Luke, he stands in the role of the repentant sinner. To repent meant to change direction, and he has set out in that new direction, to home, to father, to God. But how do we establish a relationship with someone we have declared dead?

Obviously, the prodigal son gave considerable thought to this, planning an elaborate and extended speech acknowledging his sinfulness and seeking forgiveness, and proclaiming his unworthiness to restore his relationship as a son to his father.

The father's reception illustrates the boundless grace and infinite mercy of God. He runs to his son – and adult Jewish men did not run. It was undignified and embarrassing. But he runs and kisses him. Before his son said a word, "He kissed him." The sign of forgiveness. A kiss. Even before the son had confessed his wrongdoing. And when he did confess his sin, but before he can finish his rehearsed speech and ask for forgiveness, his father calls for celebration. He put the ring on his finger and sandals on his feet, sure signs that the relationship between father and son has been restored. No elaborate speech was necessary. The prodigal son just needed to take the road home. And when his father saw him on the road, he was, indeed, "filled with compassion." This is the dimension of forgiveness we are called to when we pray in the Lord's prayer, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

But, of course, that's not the end of the story. The older brother hears the commotion, the celebration, and enquires of one of his father's slaves what is going on. When he hears that his younger brother has returned safely and that the celebration is for him, the older brother is angry. He refuses to go in to the party. After all, he has been righteous and faithful and has worked like a slave all his life, but never had his father contributed even a young goat – hardly as tasty as a fatted calf, I'm sure – to any celebration for him. Even though the father reminds him that he will still get what he is entitled to – "all that is mine is yours" as, indeed, all of his remaining estate would be the older brother's – even then, we are not told whether the older brother joins the celebration or continues to sulk. So the story ends. And in so doing, it leaves us with the question, how might we respond if we find likes of Friedrich Nietzsche bunking with us in heaven? Please, understand that this is a very hypothetical question. Don't go telling the bishop that I think Nietzsche is in heaven. That's not for me or any of us to say.

I know I would like to believe – as I think every sinner must – and we are all sinners. I would like to believe that somehow even the most unrepentant of us are granted one more chance to repent, to acknowledge we are lost and hope to be found, even after our souls are wrenched from our bodies in death. And I would hope that even those who vociferously denied God would avail themselves of that final opportunity to repent, to turn back and find the road home, to restore that broken relationship with God. But that's a question we cannot answer.

The question we can answer is whether we should join the celebration when those that appear least worthy make their way home. And by now, the answer should be obvious. If we already have accepted God's grace and the forgiveness God lavishes upon us, when we already bask in God's glory – we hardly may begrudge it to anyone else, whether we think they deserve it or not. Whether we can conceive of a divine justice that offers the kiss of forgiveness even before the repentant sinner can ask. Whether we can comprehend a God who will embrace in relationship those who took God's grace and squandered it and called God dead.

There is no bumper sticker on God's car that says Nietzsche is dead. The bumper sticker on God's car says only that Nietzsche is lost. And if the time comes when Nietzsche is found, the party will be huge. And we'll all be invited.

Amen.