

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
March 31, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Luke 15: 11-24

Sermon: A Wonderful Love (Lent 4)

Last Wednesday night, the Lenten reflection theme was “inspired by Scripture”. At one point we looked at different translations of the Bible and it was interesting to hear the very different reactions in our circle – there are those who love the traditional sound of a well-known passage – then there are those who love the new perspective created by words that are different or contemporary.

So when I looked up the parable of the Prodigal Son I looked up a variety of translations, and I kept coming back to the translation called the Message. The words which Carolyn read just a while ago, where the younger son said: “Father, I want *right now* what's coming to me.’

I think I could actually hear my father’s voice, in my head, saying to me: “You want what’s coming to you? I’ll give you what’s coming to you!” Somehow I don’t think being grounded for the rest of his life was what the prodigal son was looking for! I guess “what’s coming to you” has different connotations to different households.

The parable of the prodigal son is a wonderful parable. We only read half of it today – because the story goes on to tell the tale of the elder brother, who reacts in fear against his brothers’ homecoming – in fear that now he will have to share HIS inheritance with the irresponsible one. But that’s another sermon for another day. Today I want to focus on the notion of what it really means to get what’s coming to us.

In biblical times, according to many scholars, the tradition was that in a family with multiple sons, all the sons would inherit something. In a case like this, the property would be divided in thirds, and the elder son would inherit two of those thirds, while the younger brother would inherit one third. So the younger son’s portion was probably quite substantial. What was coming to him was more than enough to support him and allow him to make a good start into adult life.

Of course, we know that’s not how it turned out – the younger son was wasteful or foolish. Then he had the bad luck to find himself in a time of famine and economic meltdown. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t pull himself up by his own bootstraps.

Then he remembered his father’s compassion – not only to his sons, but to his workers. And he decided he would be better off a slave in his father’s household than starving in strangers’ yard.

He thought he knew what was coming to him. A dry place to sleep, a simple meal, hard work but rewarded fairly. That’s what he thought he had coming to him. And that was enough.

What was ACTUALLY coming to this prodigal son, however, was the sight of his father, running down the laneway towards him, arms open, tears streaming down his face as he welcomed the lost son home.

What was actually coming to the son was a love that had no boundaries, no limit, only loving welcome. Inheritance and forgiveness and justice for the elder brother and living happily ever after – those were all future discussions for another day. “Find a soft robe, call the neighbours, butcher the best meats – my son who was lost is found and it is time to simply love one another.

That day was a day to celebrate – for both father and son got what was coming to them. A wonderful love.

When I was googling something about inheritance laws this week, an interesting page came up. It was written by a group of law partners and it was called: *3 Things you need to know about inheritance*. I’m not big on legal language, but this is what I got out of it:

- (1) That conflict is normal. That older brother who is standing in the background in the parable today, the one wondering how his brother’s return is going to affect what’s coming to him, he’s not wicked or selfish – he’s normal. So many people believe that good families don’t have conflict, which is not true. When a family realizes there will be conflict, and that they are just being normal – that’s where the welcome begins.
- (2) That inheritance is symbolic. It’s not just about dollars and sense and what is equal and what is fair. Certain things carry particular meaning and attachment. They are often symbols of something even the one leaving them behind didn’t know. But when we are grieving, or in conflict with family members, those hidden meanings or values sometimes shock us. “Mother always loved you more...” “That was MY favourite quilt.” “Why did you get the clock and I got all that silver to polish?”
- (3) The third reality is that that which brings about the inheritance is a death – and death is final. Sometimes that is the real problem, but we have trouble naming it. What we are grieving is a loss which breaks our hearts, and we cannot dwell in that pain for very long. So our attention goes instead to the things that we think we can negotiate, or reverse, or at the very least use as a way to express all the pain that is in our hearts.

What we really inherit is the kind of love that runs down the laneway with open arms, and doesn’t care whether you are conflicted or poor or obedient or broken or in need of support. A true and generous portion of our love reflecting God’s love is the only inheritance that really counts.

Jesus’ parable is one of the best known Bible stories and that is no surprise. Over and over again, we read this story and we find ourselves playing a role in it. Henri Nouwen wrote about the parable in a famous little book, reflecting on Rembrandt’s painting of the father with the two sons. Sometimes, he wrote, I am most like the younger son, I put distance between myself and God. because faithful living leads to hard choices. It is so much easier to follow the crowd, or lose oneself in what others like.

He also wrote that sometimes he was the elder brother. In Rembrandt's painting the elder brother stands in the shadow. Nouwen could see himself in that shady figure – the elder son was unable to share in the joy of his brother's homecoming, because it might mean letting something else go.

At other times, Nouwen reflected that he was most like the father, longing for something he could not have. Most like the father, however, when he found himself completely surprised and thankful for the opportunity to be offered a second chance. And a wonderful love.

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is like a legacy for us. In a sense, we truly do "get what's coming to us". The gospel of good news reminds us that God loves us, and is always longing for us to turn towards our true home. In turn, we can then become the same legacy for others, embodying what they have "coming to them" too. Embodying the loving generosity of Christ's mission – a welcome for those who think they have been cast off – and a Christ-light for all we meet, guiding us through the shadows to a welcome home.

We each have a part to play in this parable and in its legacy. Like Jesus, it invites us to find new life in God's word and to share it with others. May we hear Jesus' invitation and respond with faith and a wonderful love, Amen