

Coffee to Go | Fourth Sunday of Lent | Year C

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Karin Peter, Blake Smith

Karin Peter 00:28

Welcome to Coffee to Go, where we center ourselves in the scriptures, seasons and holy days of the Christian tradition. I'm Karin Peter, here with Blake Smith, and we welcome you on the journey. We are in the season of Lent, which is the 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, not counting Sundays. So, during these 40 days of Lent, we center our attention on Jesus as we remember his life and ministry. And it also provides a means for us to kind of show, sharpen our own focus on our lives in relationship to what we understand about Jesus. And so the Lenten season encourages us to turn away from that which distracts us or blocks our commitment to following Jesus and during the season of Lent we try to walk more closely with Jesus as he turns his face towards Jerusalem and eventually to the cross. So where are we this week? Well, we are on the road with Jesus heading towards Jerusalem, and Jesus, being the interesting person that he was, collected a ragtag band of followers that included some unsavory types, or some air quote not our kind of people, un air quote types, And that didn't sit well with some of the righteous folks. And here we're going to, we're going to name them as being some of the Pharisees and Scribes that were a little put out at who Jesus hung around with. So Blake. What's going on?

Blake Smith 02:15

Alright? Well, we find ourselves in the 15th chapter of Luke. And actually this is where Luke shares three parables about finding what has been lost. And we're going to focus first on the problem in verses one through three, and then pick up at 11 through 32 which we know as the story of the prodigal son. So here we go...

Nw all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him, and the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them a parable. "There was a man who had two sons, the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me. So he divided his assets between them. A few days later, the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout the region, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to the fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and despair, but here I am dying of hunger. I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against

heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands.' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'quickly, 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 a, He was lost and is found', and they began to celebrate. Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf because he got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him, but he answered his Father, 'Listen, 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 comes back who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him.' Then the father said to him, '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 dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found.'"

So why does this matter? Well, at the heart of this we know that Jesus has defied all of the established divisions that were taking place in his day and ,quite honestly, still exist. You know, divisions over class and social status and religion, the national divisions that existed between peoples of different countries. He ate with the wrong kind of people. He healed the undeserving. He touched the unclean. His colleagues, disciples and followers, were typically of the laboring class and he interacted in "just" ways with other nationalities. And of course, he taught all to love their neighbor as well as their enemies. So in this prodigal son story, which real quickly, I did what one of the commentators said to do, he said that he had Googled prodigal to find out what it meant, because it's, it's used and typically thought of with this story. And I, I'm going to admit as much theological, biblical education as I got in my degree, I've always kind of thought of the prodigal as the returning son, the one who, the bad kid, the black sheep who returns. And prodigal really means 'to spend lavishly and recklessly.' And so it is associated with a story, and it does pick up the meaning of returning, but ultimately it's spending lavishly, and I think about true capacity of generosity, and maybe we all ought to be prodigals in that. So, I listened to the story a little differently, but in this story, we hear Jesus acknowledging our tendency to hold grudges. You know, to want retribution. We want things to be fair. We want things we want to get what we deserve, or we, I should say we think we want to get what we deserve. I hate to think of what I might get sometimes based on what I really deserve. But, but Jesus steers us beyond that into a way of looking at the return of what was lost and letting it be an occasion for joy. So, we could spend a greater part of a day, maybe even multiple days, debating the rights and wrongs of the story, the rights and wrongs of the prodigal son, what he did, what he should have done. What he shouldn't have done, what he deserved, you know, those kinds of things, and we could frame it in terms of what everybody, each person deserves or doesn't deserve. I'm reminded of the conversation we had a couple of weeks ago in the Epiphany season, when we were talking about the Sermon on the plane and Jesus' list of those we should love, and Karin, you brought up then that it's not just about loving those who deserve our love, but the imperative to love those we would consider undeserving.

Karin Peter 09:14

Yeah, that's hard.

Blake Smith 09:15

That is hard, and it comes back to us again. Then in this story, the father, however, chooses to forgo any conversation about who deserves what I mean. He stops the son in his tracks, and he just says, Let's get him a robe. Let's get him a ring. Let's kill the fatted calf. He chooses to live in the joy of his son's return. And the older brother, on the other hand, is so caught up in his own self and his need for justice and fairness that he can't get beyond this desire for retribution or fairness. What's important to me is, for the father, and I get it, this is a parable, so it's, it's a made up story to teach us these things. But for the father, it doesn't matter what he's done and it doesn't matter the reasoning for his return. And I say that because, you know, someone might say, well, of course, he was desperate. You know, everybody gets repented when they get to the desperate. So, you know, it would have made it would have been more believable if, while he still had some money, he decided he'd done wrong and come back. But, you know, anyway, the father doesn't care about the reason for his return. It's just the fact that he's back, and because he's back, there's now an opportunity to accomplish what couldn't be accomplished in his absence, healing and reconciliation and rebuilding of relationship, all of which is really important in the kingdom of God, to begrudge him this celebratory homecoming, as the brother did, is exactly what the Pharisees and scribes were doing. They were centered in judgment rather than joy, yeah, but we need to hear that Jesus calls us to make a different choice. And the reality is it benefits, benefits us in the long run, if we hold on to that need for equality and justice and fairness and retribution, it burns a hole in us when we could otherwise focus on the joy. So...

Karin Peter 11:35

We've talked about that so many times on this podcast Blake that that God's justice, God's purposes and God's way are not what we would always understand or even select as option number one, because they're so contrary to our individual sense of righteous behavior or right behavior and I think that's still hard for us to understand as a people today. I think people who live in kind of the "under the Christian umbrella," if you will, feel a little self-righteous about their choices, and that people who are not measuring up are simply undeserving, or perhaps deserving, of being treated as lesser than, and we see that being lived out over and over again around the world. So, it's really hard for us as humans to get out of thinking that the way we understand deserving and justice and redemption is not how God understands it, so...

Blake Smith 12:53

Right. And I, I'm reminded in these instances that certainly older generations in the church were brought up in a particular way. This is what you must do. And so, when I hear of folks struggling with newer understandings of God's grace and the need not to be so legalistic, but think in terms of principles, you can understand why someone might say, 'Well, wait a minute, I've lived my whole life, yeah, doing it this way, because that's the way I was told I was supposed to do it. So, why are they getting to judge?'

Karin Peter 13:33

Yeah, how come they get a pass? That's not fair. Yeah.

Blake Smith 13:41

It's just not fair, yeah, but we have to be like the father and just choose the joy. Use the joy of welcoming the other into community. I mean, that's ultimately, that was our goal for being so pious and self righteous in the beginning, right? So, and I'd say our, because I, you know, I don't want to point fingers at others. I certainly, I myself, yeah. Yeah.

Karin Peter 14:10

We all do it to a certain degree.

Blake Smith 14:12

So some questions that we might ask ourselves are, and first, I want to focus on just what's happening here, and that is, 'What social, cultural or political divisions, am I being called to overcome?'

Karin Peter 14:28

Well, I'm glad we didn't put personal in there, so I don't have to look too deeply when I think about, when I think about what's happening around me in my context, I think there's a lot of poverty in the United States that we don't address, we don't talk about, and most time don't want to look at, and we avert our eyes from. And that wealth division in the US is a huge one, especially for people who would have. Kind of consider themselves as middle class. We don't want to have to deal with the poverty that surrounds our suburbs. So, I think that's a division that's really critical for for at least for me and for people who live in areas like I do, to overcome.

Blake Smith 15:18

That's a good point. Another question that that leads to is, 'which brother Am I in story?' Am I the brother that's been wasteful with my resources or giftedness, who maybe only returns in points of desperation, or am I the brother who struggles to forgive others and let go of resentment. I want to hold on and wait for fairness.

Karin Peter 15:47

So yes, Blake, which brother are you?

Blake Smith 15:50

That is a question for people to consider. It wouldn't be helpful if I give an answer and make an easy on everyone. How's that for avoidance? Which brother, I guess, depends on what day. Yeah, I think so, yeah, I've been a little bit a little bit of both. Yeah, a little bit of both. The final question that we might ask, getting back to this idea of choosing, is, 'in what ways might I benefit from choosing joy instead of retribution?' I think just being honest and connecting with the humanity in each of us, we can say, well, we choose joy because that's what Jesus told us to do, right? But I would encourage us to also think about what it does to our own well being to choose joy over retribution.

Karin Peter 16:50

Yeah, absolutely. So instead of which brother, maybe the question is, When? When am I willing to behave like the father? Yes, yeah, absolutely. Well, we need to live in the scripture this week for the

fourth week of Lent, so we've given some thought to how we might experience it. And if you've listened to the podcast before, or if you know me, you know that when I'm faced with issues that give me anxiety or worry or trepidation, and usually it's about entering a room full of people or going to an event with a bunch of people, I am a big proponent of taking a moment to just stop and take three deep, peaceful breaths. So, all the kids that did book club with JoAnn Fisher and myself, they all learned about taking three deep, peaceful breaths. And even now, when I when I work with the Council of Presidents of 70 and others, and we do devotions, that's usually how I start things. So, this is a version of that practice. So, this week, we're going to breathe out resentment, and we're going to breathe in joy this week. So, to do this, you have to you have to actually think of a resentment or a grudge or a bad feeling that you are harboring somewhere in you. And if you're a really nice person, you may need to dig deep. For this, I didn't have to dig too deep, so I've got mine sitting there on the surface, ready to roll. And then take, we're going to take three deep, peaceful breaths, and with each inhale, we're going to breathe in joy, and with each exhale, we're going to breathe out resentment. And you may need to do it a couple of times this week. But in doing this practice of intentional three deep, peaceful breaths, breathing in joy, breathing out resentment we may find by the end of the week, we too had been a little bit lost, and are now found.

Blake Smith 19:13

That's great. I tried to think about my list, and I don't know that it's because I'm a good person, but I actually don't have anyone that quickly comes to mind, and I can only hope that my name doesn't quickly come to mind.

Our blessing today comes from Brian Doyle, and it's called "A Father's Day."

Brothers, I too have spent many sleepless hours worrying about money and insurance and minor in possession citations and speeding tickets and endless bouts of the flu, which might mean some horrifying disease. I too have snarled and barked and growled and roared at my children. I too have sometimes, usually in the shower, wondered what crimes I committed in a previous life to be afflicted with so rude and surly and vulgar and unappreciated progeny. Yet I too brothers know that they are why we are the luckiest men who ever lived. And I too have laughed so hard at their capers and antics that I had to lie down for a while. And I too have bathed and fed and rocked and cuddled and wrestled and played and sung with them, and believed myself at those moments to be closer to heaven than any man ever and known that this was indeed so.

Well, thanks for joining us here today at Coffee to Go. We always enjoy our time with you, and we hope that you will join us next time for the next part of our journey through the liturgical seasons and holy days of the Christian tradition.