

Lent 4, March 10, 2013. On the parable of the two lost sons (AKA the Prodigal Son).
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May 5th is Mexican Independence Day. Lemmings intentionally jump off of cliffs. Abner Doubleday invented baseball. Sherlock Holmes' most famous phrase was "Elementary, my dear Watson". The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was started by Mrs. O'Leary's cow.

Can anyone tell me what all these statements have in common? they're wrong!

Mexican Independence day is September 16; May 5th celebrates the 1862 Mexican victory over the French. Lemmings most certainly do not jump off of cliffs – But the Disney Studio so believed they did that it drove them off of a cliff for it's nature movie. There's absolutely no evidence that Abner Doubleday invented baseball. Sherlock Holmes never said "Elementary, my dear Watson", and a reporter invented the story about Mrs. O'Leary's cow to make more colorful copy!

The thing is, we assume – until disabused of the belief – that they're right. We make assumptions all the time: that it's okay to "just drop by" a relative's house without calling ahead, that it's okay to share information we've been given by a friend, that there's enough gas in the car to get us where we're going.....sometimes we're right. And sometimes the assumptions we make are faulty, and thus so are the decisions we make based on them.

Making decisions based on faulty assumptions can really do us in! Sometimes it's very minor: at Louise Deskey-Wegg's funeral I assumed one of the out-of-town readers knew that readings are read – well – from the lectern! So I didn't take the time to say anything to him. He, on the other hand, as a member of the United Church of Christ, he assumed he'd read from the podium at the very front. The result was that he got almost all the way round back the altar before we set him straight!

Sometimes faulty assumptions are deadly: James Dean was killed in an auto accident when the car he was driving was struck by someone speeding from a side road. His last words to a friend in his car were: "I mean, he's gotta stop, hasn't he?! I have the right of way".

Today's gospel passage is often misnamed "the prodigal son". Actually a better title would be "the parable of the two lost sons" because they're both lost in one way or another.

Almost all the participants make faulty assumptions. The younger son assumed that his inheritance would last a lifetime, and when it didn't that, if he returned home, his father would follow the standard cultural norms and reject him. Based on that assumption he rehearsed a monologue that he hoped would get him welcomed back, even at the cost of his honor: "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."

The Older son made the same sorts of faulty assumptions: that his brother had forfeited his birthright and shouldn't be treated as a family member, having lost his own honor, and damaged

the family's; hence not "my brother", but "your son". And, of course, he assumed the same thing his brother assumed, that his father would only accept his brother back as an indentured servant.

And Jesus' hearers almost certainly made the same faulty assumption: that this was a morality tale about "just desserts" for any who violated the natural order of things, such as by asking for their inheritance before their parent was dead.

Before we do any judging, I'm wondering this: have you ever made a faulty assumption? How about a show of hands of anyone who's never made a faulty assumption?

To be human is to make mistakes. To be human is to make faulty assumptions.

So what's significant about the father's actions?

The father then acts totally out of cultural character. He runs (very inappropriate for an elder). And in running he actually "runs the gauntlet" that the village would certainly have prepared for the returning wayward son. So he's acting in a way the entire village would look down on – they'd no doubt be saying "how could he demean himself – this action is beneath him!"

"But wait! There's more!" He publicly forgives the son by kissing him again and again on the cheeks. What does that mean? In addition to being a "public display of affection" it's also a public sign of forgiveness: the father heals the broken relationship between them.

The best robe? Ever wondered about that? The best robe is certainly the father's. By using the best robe the father *guarantees* that the son will be accepted by the community at the banquet.

The signet ring indicates *enormous trust*.

The sandals are a sign of being a free man in the house, not a servant. By placing sandals on his feet, the servants signal their re-acceptance of him as son.

Killing the calf means the entire village will be invited and prodded toward forgiveness. This size animal can feed more than one hundred people.

I want to invite you for a moment to think about this level of forgiveness and acceptance unlooked for! No one.....*no one*.....would have assumed that it would be forthcoming!

Let's now go back to the opening words of the passage, spoken by a group who found Jesus' actions to be irritating. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Who? Pharisees. There are those – and I'm one of them – who think that Jesus was a Pharisee. Pharisees were the progressives of 1st Century Judaism, and Judaism today is descended from the Pharisees. But even progressives have limits!! So let's re-phrase it to give it a contemporary context: "This guy has absolutely no standards; just when we seem to be making headway – getting our foot in the door up on the hill with those senators to support new gun control legislation he shows up eating with gun owners – it'll upset the whole applecart."

Jesus' story is about forgiving anyone, even someone who seems to be violating the most basic cultural beliefs of the community, and – in the face of their repentance – welcoming them back home with great celebration. *Back home* with great celebration.

Which brings us to the elder son. Instead of honoring his father by accepting his brother and playing his appropriate role as chief host at the meal, the elder son publicly insults and humiliates his father.

And here we are. Here the parable ends, rather abruptly.

What did the elder son do after this moment? Did he, too, recognize his faulty assumptions and embrace his brother?

For Jesus that's the question he's placing before "the Pharisees and scribes" whom Luke identifies at the beginning of the story.

And before us. We are, so often, that Elder Son. What would you do? Enquiring minds want to know! So as we enter the home stretch in this particular season of Lent today's gospel invites us to question our own assumptions: about each other, about the cultural expectations that often bind us, and about the God we meet in our daily lives. Who knows what might happen!! Amen.