

Who will Join the Banquet of Reconciliation?

March 10, 2013

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In 1967, the year Dawn and I went to Zambia, Israel went to war against Egypt, Jordan and Syria, occupying the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank including East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. And they did in 6 days. I remember feeling, 20 years after the formation of the State of Israel, how I admired their success. Since that war, I have not paid much attention to the Palestinian side of the story. The image of Palestinians embedded in our minds is that of suicide bombers. A few years ago, I was awakened to the fact that I had dehumanized the Palestinians people. A few close friends told of their experience in Iraq and Palestine turned my heart as I learned about the harshness of their oppression under Israeli occupation. Reading about the daily struggle of Palestinians having to cross several of the 600 check points to go to school, to work in their fields or offices, to go shopping or to the hospital, has reawakened a conviction that I had to get involved.

So, as some of you know – maybe not all of you – I have become actively involved in the past year in organizing a network of people across the country to raise awareness of the conditions of Palestinians under the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. That is background to how I hear the story of the two sons and their father as told by Luke.

I am sure I have preached on this story before, but not for quite a while. I couldn't find an old sermon, but I remember thinking that the father's forgiveness of both sons was the point. I have always thought that the younger son was a bit of a cheat, but then had some sympathy for him as he "came to himself" and was ready to come home and submit to being one of his hired workers. With our work ethic, I also identified with the older son.

But I have since come across the writing of Rev. Kenneth Bailey who lived and taught in the Middle East for 40 years and who stresses the importance of reading the Bible through the eyes of the Palestinian culture. I have to give Bailey credit for a new Palestinian perspective in understanding the ministry of reconciliation in the Palestine-Israel search for peace.¹

The cross is key to understanding reconciliation. It has always been forefront for me in my understanding of my role in ministry, but it has become more so as I become engaged with the

¹ <http://www.eprodigals.com/The-Prodigal-Son/The-Prodigal-Son.html>

See also: <http://deforestlondon.wordpress.com/2010/03/14/a-palestinian-perspective-on-the-prodigal-son/>

Palestine/Israel search for a solution to peace. The story of the two sons and the father is about reconciliation.

We know the story well. 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' He asks his father to divide the inheritance – before his father's death. In reality, he wished his father dead. In 1st century Palestine, this would be serious violation of traditional culture. For that insulting request he should have been disowned and banished from the home. But the father breaks the traditional code and gives it to him.

The son takes off, spends it all in expensive living (not necessarily degenerate, as we often accuse him of doing.) According to Bailey, if a boy wastes his family inheritance and then dares to return home, the village performs a *kezazah* ceremony – breaking a pot in front of him, symbolizing their rejection of him.

The story says that he 'came to himself.' Is that an honest realization of his guilt? Perhaps not. More likely, Bailey says the Greek term used means he was trying to find a way to save himself from the *Kezazah*, not to repent.

So the son looks for a job to earn back the money he lost, so that when he goes home, he can pay it back, and avoid the village *Kezazah*. But when he has to resort to feeding pigs, he decides to return home and face the humiliation of *Kezazah*.

He knows that the father-son relationship is over, so he contrives a speech to persuade his father to feed him by hiring him as a servant.

So how is the father supposed to greet a son who has humiliated him? In Palestine culture, he is expected to wait in the house to see what the son has to say for himself. Running would be highly undignified. But the father breaks the rules and runs – which he can only do by lifting his robe, a further humiliation.

But as the father embraces him, and kisses him, he sees joy and love, not anger. His contrived speech is unfinished. He never says; treat me as a hired hand. He simply accepts being found.

There will be no *Kezazah*. Instead there will be a banquet.

The humiliating act of the father in breaking the cultural code is sacrificial. The father's act of sacrificial welcome of his rebellious son demonstrates a radical grace that leads to reconciliation.

But what about the older son? He defames his brother – accusing him of sleeping with prostitutes (not mentioned earlier) – and refuses to acknowledge him as brother. He refuses

to join the party – a serious public insult. Again, the father should demand obedience, but instead he extends grace and offers love.

The story does not tell us if the older son joined the party. But who was the party really for? Would anyone attend a party for these disrespectful sons? The celebration really honors the father and his self-sacrifice and generosity toward both sons.

The story is about God's reconciling act of sacrifice, represented by the cross.

But reconciliation is cross-shaped: "vertical" reconciliation between people and God and "horizontal" reconciliation between human beings.

In the parable, both sons were scheming to win a place in the father's household. The acceptance of the son by the father did not depend on the son's change of attitude. Our reconciliation with God is not due to anything we have done, but what God has done for us in Christ.

So how do we model that kind of reconciliation between humans? What banquet are we refusing to join? Who do we exclude, defame or dehumanize? By refusing to join the banquet, we are insulting God. In the rejection of Palestinian status as a nation, are we excluding and defaming them, and refusing to join the banquet?

After meeting Ramzi Zananiri, a Palestinian representative to General Council last August, and hearing his story and enjoying a meal with him, I have a deeper appreciation of Palestinian culture and faith – and of God's affirmation of their desire for reconciliation with Israelis.

I accept the existence of the state of Israel and respect Jewish culture. But how much more could we respect them if they could they see themselves as the older brother who hears God saying, "You are always with me..." and then be willing to join the banquet and stop excluding and defaming their brothers."

The normal human process makes repentance and forgiveness a precondition to reconciliation. The blocks to reconciliation are often a prior demand by one or both sides for admission of injustice and repentance in the form of reparations to correct the injustice before reconciliation can happen. That happens between nations as well as individuals. How long do we hold out for the other to give in?

The parable of the father and sons demonstrates God's way of reconciliation as a different way for human reconciliation. Reconciliation without admission of guilt is revolutionary. For me that is the essence of the cross.