

March 27, 2022 – Fourth Sunday of Lent

When I was a kid, one of my favorite series of books were the “Choose Your Own Adventure” novels. Every so many pages, you had the choice of what to do and one page to turn to or another. You could go back and re-read the book and make different choices and wind up with a dozen or more different endings. More often than not, it was like flipping a coin, your fate in the story was really just left up to chance. There wasn’t an obvious right-or-wrong decision.

As I recall, the first of these books I ever read, called “The Lost Ninja,” my first set of choices ended up in being captured by the *yakuza*, the Japanese mafia, and sold into slavery in Hong Kong. Not a terribly satisfying result ... and I kind of felt like what you went through and did first was the “real” ending and everything else was just satisfying one’s own curiosity. So I liked to pretend that that wasn’t what I

reeeeeally had wanted to choose and one of the better outcomes, one which didn't involve being initiated into the yakuza and losing a joint off the ol' pinky finger was what I had intended to pick all along.

I was also a big fan of Super Mario Brothers. The video games. The comic books. And once they started coming out, the "Ninetendo Adventure" books that, uh, *borrowed* from the "Choose Your Own" concept. I liked the twist that they made the reader think a little harder, utilize some strategy, solve some puzzles to determine the best choice to get the one happy ending. All the alternatives ranged from a little disappointing to you're dead, game over.

The story of the Prodigal Son is a parable Jesus presents to the Pharisees and scribes who criticized him in something like a choose-your-own adventure format. Now, of course, it doesn't have a couple lines at the end in italics like, "To toss your infuriating little brother out on his backside

and take dad's dinner for your own – *you deserve it!*, turn to Luke, chapter 25. To join in the celebration and then start to do some serious self-reflection, turn to Luke 28.”

But the good religious folk are invited into the story nonetheless from the perspective of the indignant elder son. And I can recall trying to become like good religious folk and reading this parable for the very first time more than 20 years ago. And it took years to get past the only way I could find to read it ... “I'm just going to trust you, God, that this is supposed to make sense because it sure doesn't to me. The older son has every right to feel like he does. This isn't fair.”

Maybe that's because I'm an oldest child. Maybe it's because even before I knew God, I knew I had a conscience. As frustrated as I could be with my parents sometimes, I never wished them dead, as the prodigal effectively does. To ask for half your inheritance while your parents still lived would have been the equivalent of saying, “You're better

dead to me than alive. Give me what's coming to me and that's all you are good to me for."

It's the height of disrespect and it's the height of absurdity and utter frustration to hear this play out. From the perspective of the older son, this doesn't begin as a choose-your-own adventure story. It's more like watching a movie where the main characters are both idiots, for different reasons, but it's like tearing your hair out to watch one mistake after another. People just don't act like that. And when they do, I want no part of it. These are the kind of movies I find myself doing one of two things: turn it off in disgust because I just can't relate to these people or hate-watch it and try to appreciate if it can be so bad, it's good.

Because a son who says that to his father should receive no more generous a response than "GET OUT!" and feel lucky enough to get out alive. But this man quietly obliges. And the prodigal shows his character to be just as

one should expect from such an ingrate. Everything he does with it is exactly the wrong thing.

Turn your back on your hometown, your country, get as far away as you can. Insulting.

Squander all his riches. Could have seen that coming a mile away.

Go to work feeding filthy pigs. That's just desserts right there.

Finally, this is starting to make a little bit of sense at least. Slide that finger off the power button on the remote just a hair.

And when the kid realizes he's better off on the lowest rung of the ladder back at dad's old farm. Well now, older sons, you can start to appreciate this story now because here is the redemption arc. He's going to live out his days doing the dirty work he always should have been and you're

going to get to watch him getting his comeuppance as he sweats and stinks it out for decades to come.

But then dear old dad comes back into the picture and turns the whole thing ludicrous again.

Respected patriarchs do not run and hug and kiss ingrate screw-up kids. That's unheard of. This story can be so familiar to us that it ceases to shock. It's hard to hear it again as if hearing it for the first time. The welcome-home is ridiculous and any self-respecting, good, upstanding person should be outraged by the scene they come home to after working their butt off all day, as they have for years. This just isn't right.

The father in this story must look into his oldest son's eyes and have the utmost compassion for him as he speaks words that will only comfort if they can be allowed to sink in.

You are always with me and all that is mine is yours.

It doesn't always penetrate the hearts and the minds of the good religious folk ... no, the vice of the prodigals, the egregious sinners of this world, that's not truly the good life, of course.

But neither is doing the right thing because everybody says it's the right thing, it's what's expected, it doesn't rock the boat. Neither is it joylessly checking the boxes and waiting for some joy someday at the end in paradise. It's not being able to look down on others who lost their way and rubbing their noses in their mistakes and never letting them live them down. It's not grumbling, folding your arms and getting stuck on, "Well, that's just not fair."

Because God the Father is indeed not fair.

God lavishes forgiveness and a welcome with open arms before a word of confession can even stutter past his child's lips.

God gives richly to the undeserving.

Getting your work done like you're supposed to. Doing what God commands. Declining to live over-extravagantly, there's nothing wrong with that. It's all good stuff.

But it's only a start. Working in the Kingdom of God is meant to be enjoyed. Time with God is meant to be looking at one another in the eye, with laughter, with care and in growing in relationship. God's commands are meant to be appreciated and not dealt with as a burden. Any psalmist can tell you that. A modest life can be admirable but there's no shame in a little celebration, some moderate indulgence, if you will.

It seems the older son in this story, he forgot the rules are a fine means but not an end unto themselves. All work and no play, that dulled the boy's sense of wonder and gratitude.

So what comes next?

The choice is left to the character of the good son. Will you come in and rejoice with all the others at the redemption of your brother? Or will you remain out there grumbling, waiting in vain for it all to make sense and to come out fair to your liking?

It's the same choice we have in our relationship with God.

Do we want to celebrate whenever anyone comes home and rejoice as God does, no matter what they have done?

Or do we want to see ourselves as somehow better than others who lost their way and be so wrapped up in their affairs that we lose our own real sense of identity?

I've played the latter game. I sense we all at least sometimes do.

It's not any fun.

It sounds like they're having a lot of fun, though, at the party for the lost and now found.

The invitation from God is still open.

It always is.

Amen.