

Date: March 6, 2016
Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Title: Coming to Our Senses

Quite frankly, I think we scribes and Pharisees
have gotten a bum rap.

After all, we're God's children too.

We have been accused of rigidly adhering
to the Torah
and being unaware of and insensitive to
the needs of others.

What I want to know is,

"How can you say that about us?"

"How can you accuse us of such things
without knowing us,
without walking in our shoes?"

Life was very complicated then,
not just for the *anawim*, the poor of the land,
but for us also.

Our people had endured one tragedy after another
stretching back for hundreds of years.

First, the Assyrians invaded our land
and carted off its wealth and people.

Then, it was the Babylonians,
who in addition to plundering everything in sight,
destroyed the Temple Solomon built.

They were followed by the Persians,
then the Greeks,
and finally the Romans.

Each drained our coffers
and through appointed officials ruled
with an iron fist.

Always it was an uneasy peace
dependent upon the Jewish leaders to negotiate
with the hateful invaders.

We came to our senses after the Babylonian invasion.

Realized that we
through our failure to adhere to God's law
had brought the pain of living
as enslaved people on ourselves.

Our ancestors in the faith determined then
not to ever let that happen again.
Believing that the Torah was the way to salvation.
they taught it was essential for us to adhere
to its every jot and tittle.
There could be no exceptions
if our people wanted to be free again,
free to live under our own fig tree without fear.
So, yes, we looked askance at Jesus
and followed him
and questioned his teachings
and his association with sinners and outcasts.
He threatened the uneasy peace we had with the Romans,
and more than that,
he threatened any hope we had
of living as free people in the Promised Land.

To this day, people question my motivation
for returning to my Father's house.
They don't seem to know
that I see the knowing looks that pass between them,
see their raised eyebrow and sarcastic smiles
and hear their snide asides.

They don't know,
or perhaps they just don't care.
They presume to think they know me,
know my thoughts,
my motivations,
my innermost feelings.

But, I ask you, "How can they?"
I don't know them.

I grew up feeling like I was second best.
Sure, I was the baby,
and that buys you something for awhile.
But, baby's grow up,
and let me tell you,
that's a rude awakening.
My older brother could do everything I did,
only he did it better,
and he was dutiful and responsible.

He never whined
or talked back or forgot to do anything
Dad asked him to do.
I tried, I really did.
But, I liked to have fun and be with my friends
and try new ways of doing things.
None of that seemed important
to my dad or my brother.
They worked from sun up to sundown
and told me time and again
it was just too risky to try my suggestions.
There didn't seem to be a place for me in the family,
and I began to wonder if I belonged there.

Then, something happened
that precipitated my decision to leave.
I heard that my older brother would inherit
two-thirds of everything Dad had,
and something inside me snapped.
It didn't seem fair.
I began to wonder
if that were why he was always Johnny-on-the-spot.
He knew most of it would be his one day,
and he was protecting his investment,
perhaps even then edging me out.
I began asking myself
why I should work hard for him.
He was going to get two-thirds of my labor.
Even a hired hand gets to keep everything he works for.
It was then I asked Dad for my share of the inheritance.
I could see the hurt look in his eyes,
but though I'm ashamed to admit it now,
I didn't care.
I just wanted to get away from there,
from all the bad feelings about myself,
from everything that said loud and clear
I was second best
or worse less than a hired hand.

Dad sold part of the farm,
something Jews never do ,

because we believe the land is God's gift to us.
Yet, Dad sold it and gave me my inheritance.
I left without telling anyone goodbye.
It was the middle of the night.
I headed to the nearest big city.
There I had more fun than anyone could want.
In no time at all,
 I went through my inheritance
 and ended up on the street.
My newfound friends suddenly no longer knew me.
I was alone, truly and totally alone.
I ended up tending pigs,
 getting down in the mud with them,
 reduced to eating what they ate
 just to stay alive.

It was then, as I was eating one of the pods,
 which are shaped like little horns,
 that I came to my senses
 or more accurately stated,
 God brought me to my senses.
God helped me see who I truly am,
 the son of a loving father,
 who treats everyone, even his hired hands,
 justly and kindly.
Although I had cruelly demanded my inheritance
 and then irresponsibly squandered it,
 my father was a kind man,
 a man willing to help people in need.
So, I determined to return to the place of my birth
 and ask for a job.
What happened when I arrived
 was as much a shock to me
 as it was to my brother.

I have just one question for you?
Who can compete with a baby?
Two words say it all, "No one!"
They are cute and cuddly and curious about everything.
Once they start talking,
 it's "why, why, why?" from morning to night.

O sure, they do grow up.

But, then it's,

“Don't complain.

You did exactly the same thing.

They're just learning.

They'll grow out of it.”

But, they don't.

No matter how old they get,

they're still the baby.

and Mom and Dad just kept

making allowances for him.

My parents really treated me differently.

As a kid, all I ever heard was,

“You're the older one.

You know better.

It's important for you to set a good example

for your little brother.”

When I got older, the litany changed.

Then, it was,

“Your dad needs your help running the farm.

Don't you know we're counting on you?

All of this will one day be yours.

Don't you care?”

I did care.

I really did.

But, I saw my youth slipping through my hands,

and I wanted to have a little fun

before it was too late.

There was nothing to be done

other than what needed to be done

so I did it.

The more I did it, the more I raged inside.

I felt unnoticed,

taken for granted,

unappreciated by my own parents.

When my brother came home

and my father went out to greet him

and gave him the keys to the house

and threw a feast for him,

all the pain and hurt and disappointment and anger

broke free and came pouring out.
 It wasn't fair.
 He never gave me a party,
 never gave me the keys to the house,
 never ran after me,
 never let me know I was his son,
 not another of his hired hands.
 No one knows who I am....

When will my children ever learn?
 One thought that he had to grab everything
 and the other that he had to earn everything.
 How wrong they were.
 I tried to show them,
 tried to teach them,
 but they just couldn't see it.
 Couldn't see that life
 can't be grabbed like fruit off a tree
 or earned like a paycheck.
 Life has to be received like a gift
 and cherished for the gift it is
 and lived in gratitude.
 When that happens,
 the world gets bigger, not smaller,
 and hearts open to others and do not close,
 and each day brings its own gifts,
 no matter how challenging the day is.

When will my children ever learn?
 Learn that I have other children,
 whom I cherish as much as them,
 children who have deep wells
 of fear and sorrow
 and disappointment and anger
 living inside of them?
 Children, who think they can control
 every facet of their lives,
 and Children, who have relinquished
 all responsibility for their lives
 and Children, who just muddle through their days
 without hope for tomorrow?

When will my children ever learn?
When will they come to their senses?
When will they come home to me?
I stand scanning the horizon for them.
All is prepared for the glorious feast we will share.
There will be much to celebrate,
 for they will have come home to themselves.
Oh, what a day that will be.
Until that glorious day,
 I will ever scan the horizon for them. Amen.