

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.