

**Sermon for 3-31-19**  
**Scriptures – Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21**  
**The Rev. Maggie Leidheiser-Stoddard**  
**Christ Episcopal Church, Springfield OH**

“The Parable of the Jealous Monkeys”

Once upon a time, there were twelve capuchin monkeys, happy and well-fed, living in a world-renowned primatology research center. The monkeys’ human friends were interested in their emotions; specifically, whether or not the monkeys experienced jealousy. So the humans came up with an experiment.

They divided the monkeys into pairs, and housed each pair in a large cage with a see-through mesh barrier in the middle. The humans placed small rocks in one corner of each cage, and they trained the monkeys to retrieve the rocks one-by-one and carry them to the opposite corner of the cage. Each time a monkey completed this task, he or she would get a reward – a small bit of cucumber. Capuchin monkeys like cucumber. All twelve of the monkeys were happy to continue working, carrying the rocks to and fro, as long as they got their cucumber treats each time. But when the humans stopped giving out the cucumber, the monkeys stopped working. Pretty simple equation – no pay, no work.

But then, the humans tried something different. Capuchin monkeys like cucumber just fine, but they **really** love grapes. So the humans continued placing the rocks in the cages, and instructing the monkeys to transport them, and rewarding them each time. Except now, for each pair of monkeys, one monkey would get cucumber rewards, and the other would get grapes.

At first, the monkeys who were getting cucumbers slowed their pace. They continued to perform the task, but not as quickly as their lucky grape-munching comrades. After watching their partners receive grapes three or four times, the cucumber recipients began making angry vocalizations. But they still didn’t

get any grapes. With their loud protests going unheeded, the cucumber monkeys did the only thing they could to express the magnitude of their displeasure – they sat their monkey butts down and refused to work one second more. These jealous monkeys were not about to keep performing tasks for humans who weren't rewarding them fairly. If their friends got grapes, then darn it, they wanted grapes too! And the truth is, they deserved grapes – right?

This is not actually a parable. It's an experiment conducted by the famed Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal in his lab on the campus of Emory University in 2007<sup>i</sup>. He has since replicated the experiment with chimpanzees, to similar results. De Waal's research shows us that jealousy – that shameful emotion we all feel, and try to hide – isn't unique to humans, or even dutiful older brothers.

+++

The Parable of the Prodigal Son confounds us. We know we're not supposed to take the older brother's side, and be angry with the unreasonably forgiving father; but somehow, we can't help it. The older brother has done all the right things, followed all the rules. He's been loyal to his father. He's dependable and responsible. Dad has always been able to count on him.

Everything was copacetic until little brother came crawling back, covered in pig waste. Irresponsible, greedy, selfish, impulsive, no sense of duty or decency... little brother is the polar opposite of older brother in all things, and from older brother's perspective, it probably seems right and just that little brother has fallen so far (from living the high life to wallowing in the pig sty).

Apparently the only thing these brothers share in common is the enormity of their father's love.

We can understand the older brother's frustration, can't we? We want things to be fair. It's not fair that dad immediately forgives little brother without making him grovel or pay for his sins. It's not fair that dad kills the fatted calf and puts on a big soiree for this bratty little brother the moment he returns. It's not fair that that other monkey gets sweet, juicy, delicious grapes when I'm only getting pieces of cucumber, darn it. ***It's not fair!***

+++

We are just like those rock-toting capuchin monkeys, *just like them*. We want everything to be fair and equitable. If I work harder than you and follow all the rules and do a better job, I should get a better reward, right? This parable is infuriating because it offends our sense of propriety and fairness and just desserts.

But Jesus isn't telling this parable to stroke our egos or affirm our instincts about how the world should work. Remember the setup – Jesus is sharing a meal with tax collectors and sinners (trashy people, who are some of his favorite dining companions). And the Pharisees, the ones who follow all the rules and never put a single toe out of line, don't like it. They're grumbling to each other (as they are wont to do) about how unseemly and undignified and ungodly this Jesus is. After all, if he were really God's son, there's no way he would welcome these trashy, sinful people to his table – especially when there are so many good and godly people who deserve those seats far more.

Jesus knows what the Pharisees are thinking and saying, just like he knows when we are jealous of a neighbor's good fortune or begrudge a colleague's success. His response is this parable. And the reason it confounded the Pharisees then, and confounds us now, is that the parable is **not about us**. We want it to be about us, we think it's about us – just as we think everything is about us – but it's not. This parable is about the nature of God. God is the author

and the main actor, and we are small (but valued) players in God's story.

+++

Lucky for us, God is always ready to forgive. Lucky for us, God welcomes sinners with open arms. Lucky for us, God's love for us doesn't end when we wander off into greed and selfishness and ignorance. Like the younger son in the parable, we are never beyond the scope of God's mercy. Jesus will share a meal with anyone who comes to his table; and God will embrace anyone who has fallen away and seeks to return.

We are all sinners. We have all fallen away from the purposes God has in mind for us; we have all been selfish and callous and judgmental and dishonest. The Parable of the Prodigal Son should make us jump for joy! This is our blessed assurance that no matter how badly we screw up, God's love will always be there for us.

But sometimes, we can't help being jealous. We can't help stewing over how unfair it is that God should celebrate over the repentance of a notorious sinner. If God is handing out grapes to those other monkeys, then I want one too!

What did Paul say at the beginning of today's reading from 2 Corinthians?

*"From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view... If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"<sup>ii</sup>*

Can we let go of that old human point of view? Can we rise above our jealous monkey instincts, and celebrate the miraculous power of God's love and mercy?

Are we in this for the reward, or for the relationship?

In the parable, the father tells the older brother: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”<sup>iii</sup>

Hear those words -- **You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.**

That's it, right there. That's the relationship between God and God's loyal children. That's what we realize we have when we lay down all our jealousy and self-regard. It's sweeter than any grape, and more glorious than any fancy party. It's our inheritance; and it's far more than we deserve.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> [www.pnas.org/content/104/47/18854](http://www.pnas.org/content/104/47/18854)

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 15:31