

Arvada
United Methodist Church

March 8, 2009

The Zax: Dancing in the Desert
The Prodigal Son: Luke 15: 11-20

Rev. Valerie Oden

Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable of a community of ducks waddling off to duck church to hear the duck preacher. The duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had given the ducks wings with which to fly. With these wings there was nowhere the ducks could not go, there was no God-given task the ducks could not accomplish. With those wings they could soar into the presence of God. Shouts of "Amen" were quacked throughout the duck congregation. At the conclusion of the service, the ducks left, commenting on what a wonderful message they had heard -- and waddled back home.

That may be how those gathered at table with Jesus that day responded when they heard the story of the Prodigal child.

Charles Dickens has called it "the greatest story ever told." Some say it is the finest short story in literature. Another poet has deemed it a "flawless piece of art." This story has inspired poet and artist alike through the centuries. One preacher has said that the story of the prodigal son captures "the essence of the Christian faith."

It's a story about pride and humility, the willingness to bend and turn around. The Christian tradition calls that turning around repentance, when we step out of our self-oriented stubborn will and yield to a greater good.

After writing off his father and squandering his inheritance, the young son is at the bottom—and hungry. He has a whole speech planned in his head to say to his parents, but he never has a chance. He's welcomed with open arms.

Dr. Seuss Zax story doesn't end so well. As Rusty said last week, we are exploring the theology of this brilliant poet's stories during Lent, and we're indebted to James Kemp and his book *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*.

The Zax each learned a certain rule in their schools: one learned to always go north, the other learned to always go south. And so they do. Until one day they meet on another on the path, and neither will step aside. They stand there in their stubbornness as the world builds up around them, leaving them stuck nose to nose.

Such pride can be seen in conflicts that rage for years—internationally, nationally, within our own families sitting right here. Peoples become estranged and genocide happens. Parents and children, siblings, neighbors become estranged and God weeps.

We all get stuck in our ways. It's human to want to remain in what's comfortable, remain in believing we're right, remain holding onto grudges. But Jesus turned the world upside down with his life and death; his invitation was to live for goodness' sake, not our sake.

And we can't do that and remain stuck in our pride. It just doesn't work.

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The same is true in the community of faith, though it's often much more subtle. We want what's comfortable—and that's natural. If we've always gone south we want to remain going south. But there's a deeper call—the call of life, embraced by grace.

It's the call to recognize that our lives are not actually ours, but belong to the wholeness unfolding. It's the call to be the people of God as prophets for justice and grace and love in this world.

We can do that the way we've always done it and watch the world move around us ignoring us. Or we can find ways to do that that reach out to this world and speak to it a message of eternal life that sets feet to dancing and hearts ignited with love.

Like the son in Jesus' story, we too are called to soften our ways and turn around toward home. And it begins in the smallest of ways, like reaching out to someone lost, or saying sorry to our partner, or smiling at the cashier in the grocery store.

It's not a big thing being asked of us as Christians, it's only everything.

And like the son in Jesus' story, we might be surprised at the healing that can occur in the brokenness. We might find our feet dancing in the desert with the Zax.

The alternative is unthinkable.