

The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 6, 2016
Year C, RCL

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Joshua 5:9-12
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The father said, “But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you take a look at the citation for the Gospel reading for this morning, you will see that selection omits verses four through ten. I always get suspicious when this happens wondering what the makers of the Lectionary have suppressed. In this case it is quite revealing. In these seven omitted verses, Jesus tells us two parables. First there is the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd who has one hundred sheep and loses one will actually leave the ninety-nine and search for the one who is lost. And when he finds it, he brings it home and says to his neighbors, “Rejoice with me for have found my sheep which was lost.” Jesus concludes, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Next Jesus tells another parable about a woman who has ten coins and loses one. She sweeps her whole house until she finds it. She says to her friends, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.” And Jesus concludes, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner repents.”

Then comes the story we just heard, what is usually called the Story of the Prodigal Son. These three stories are what I call the Lost and Found parables. They all focus on the joy that comes when that which was lost is found. So let us look at what is my favorite of all the parables.

The younger brother begins by telling his father that he wishes Dad was dead. “I want my inheritance now. I can’t wait until you die.” Remarkably, the father gives the young man half of his estate. The son goes off and spends it all in self-indulgence. When the money is gone, there is a recession, and the only job he can get is slopping hogs on farm. He is so hungry that the pigs’ food is looking good. Then he comes to himself. The son reconnects with his true self; he comes to as if he had been unconscious or under a spell. This is a reminder that sin is fundamentally irrational. It makes us crazy. It separates us from our true selves as well as from God and from other people. The son now realizes that back on his father’s farm he could work as a servant and be far better off than he is now. He rehearses the speech he will make to his father. “I know I am no longer worthy to be considered your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”

So he goes home. And here comes the beautiful moment. The father is sitting on the porch and sees the young man come trudging along the road. He looks again, for he can’t believe his eyes. Then he jumps up and runs down the drive and throws his arms around his son. The son starts his speech, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son...” but his father cuts him off and won’t let him finish. He is too busy giving orders to prepare a feast to welcome him home. This is a miniature of a beautiful, larger than life sculpture in the Bishop’s Garden at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. You may look at as you come up for communion and remember the joy of God when we come home.

Now the scene shifts to the older son, the dutiful one who always did the right thing. He is furious that all this fuss is being made for his no good loser of a kid brother. Besides, this is his inheritance his father is spending on the feast. Notice the pronouns in this exchange. The older son says, “I have served you and never disobeyed you, and you never even gave me a goat to celebrate with friends, but *this son of yours* returns who used up all your money with dissolute

living and you kill our prize calf for him!” The older brother wants distances himself from his no account brother and calls him his father’s son. The Father replies. “It is fitting to make merry and be glad for *this brother of yours* was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.” The father insists that they are brothers calling the returnee “your brother.” He expects rejoicing when the brother returns. In the context of the three parables told in response to the Pharisees and the scribes complaining that Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them,” who do you think the older brother represents?

And what about us? I suspect that most of us at various times in our lives have played each of the three roles. Sometimes we are the older brother. We look at others’ misbehavior with judgment and are proud to be more virtuous than they. If we are pious, we may shake our heads and say what a pity it is that the drug addict or the teenage mother or the homeless person is in such a plight, but after all, we say, it’s their fault.

Sometimes we are younger son, the one who has made bad choices, as wasted time or money, has repudiated relationships, become addicted to something, or has caused damage. We have come to ourselves and tried to get our lives back in order. We looked for a second chance; we have accepted the reality of our new situation. We have been astounded and overjoyed at receiving mercy and love and acceptance.

Sometimes we are the father, the one who has lost something precious, or someone precious, and then unexpectedly what was lost is returned. And we are overcome with our joy and need to share our joy with as many people as possible.

When I turned twenty-one, my parents gave me an antique Greek cross. It was quite old and valuable. It had St. George on one side and St. Mary on the other. I wore it all the time. After several years, Alinda and I and our daughters were on a family vacation with Alinda’s family in

the White Mountains. When we returned to our home in Woodbridge, I could not find my cross. I searched the car, the driveway, the house, everywhere. It was gone. I must have lost it in New Hampshire. Time passed. Seventeen years later, we had a particularly dry summer. There had been a very large, overgrown yew at the corner of the back porch, which I had taken down in June. Where it had overshadowed the ground there was bare earth. All summer I had spread grass seed and watered it trying to restore the lawn, but it stubbornly refused to grow and remained bare dirt. Then came the week after Labor Day. It was a week full of death and loss. I had a parishioner die in the hospital. Another had a funeral. On Saturday, I finally began drafting a sermon. I hated what I had written and was in a foul mood. I got up to go out and check the laundry to see if it were dry. I went out the door around the corner of the back porch. Out of habit, I glanced down at the barren patch, expecting it to be just as dead as everything else was that day. There in the middle of that well-examined earth was my cross. Seventeen years later. I was so astounded I lost my balance and staggered a bit. I said out loud, "O Lord, what are you doing to me?" And I heard a voice say, "Everything will be restored."

Everything. What is lost will be found, what is broken will be mended. Sins will be forgiven. The dead shall be raised. This is the Good News. This is the Gospel. This is what gives us strength and hope in dark times. And this is why we rejoice and give thanks always.

And here it is. It is an eighth century Greek soldiers' reliquary cross with St. George on one side and the Mother of God on the other. Rejoice with me that it was lost and now is found. As we come to the altar to receive God's life in the sacrament, as we come to partake of the heavenly banquet, we can remember the Father's words, "We have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." We have to celebrate because we have wandered far in a land that is waste and come home to

find love, acceptance, and restoration. So have we all been lost, and now we are found. And there is rejoicing in heaven and on earth. Amen.