

March 27, 2022 - 4th Sunday of Lent - A reflection

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

I wonder how many of us had a kind person during our childhood who made a big impact. Perhaps it was a teacher who went the 'extra mile' or a Sunday school teacher who helped you understand more about Jesus. For me one of those people was the elderly couple who lived next door to our home in North Bay. They lived in a small house with a large vegetable garden in the back and a beautiful flower garden in the front. The side yard was left to grass which was cut a couple of times a year with a scythe - what a fascinating thing to watch. This couple would happily offer their time to this shy little boy from next door and speak to him with real interest. I give thanks to God for these two kindly people who asked for nothing in return while making me feel welcomed and important. With four brothers it was sometimes a chore to get attention in my own home so it was great that my neighbours helped to fill in that gap. I hope that I have passed on that level of acceptance and welcome to those whom I have met over the years. The memory of their kindness, alongside some other events, helped me find my way back to the Father's house. Perhaps you have a similar story from your past about someone who was used by God to bring you home.

The well known story of the Prodigal Son is featured in this week's liturgy. Luke has included this story alongside stories of lost things being found because that is truly the story of the human race. We are so often lost even if we don't realize it. We are asked to recognize this reality in the confession used in the Book of Common Prayer where the gathered congregation is instructed to say, "we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us." This is a corporate acknowledgment that without God the human race is lost. The story of the Prodigal son is a wonderful description of what God does about that fact which is In contrast to the Pharisees who seem to want to exclude lost sheep who do not come back to the fold in the 'right' way. Jesus dives right in to find those who are lost and is criticized for the effort.

The passage begins with a story of the breaking of a relationship. The final action of the younger son leaving home revealed a much deeper and unacknowledged breakdown that already existed. This parallels the story from Genesis about the fall of humanity in which we see a final step which revealed that a fully trusting relationship had not been established between humanity and God. The two sons were both guilty of not having as close a relationship with the father in the story as was

wished for by the father. The final breakdown was revealed when the young son essentially declared to his father, 'I wish you were dead' before leaving his father's home. The pain of that statement is not explored in the story but anyone who has had a loved one make a similar statement will know something of the pain. Humanity, in many ways, is saying that to God when we reject his many offers of forgiveness and mercy in order to 'do our own thing'. The father in the story, probably with tears in his eyes and a broken heart, let the son go. As God cast Adam and Eve from the garden it was with tears in his eyes and a broken heart and like the father in the story he watches and waits for his children to return. Jesus was being criticized for going out in search of the lost sheep but that what God is doing.

The second son doesn't often get much attention when this parable becomes the topic for a sermon and it would seem, from his perspective at least, he didn't get much attention from his father. The desire on the part of the father was to have a full and loving relationship with his sons but they chose to refuse the offer and that reality broke the father's heart. In the story from Luke the father chose to wait and allow the children the freedom to make their own choices and suffer the consequences. The elder son missed opportunities to enjoy his life and his relationship with his father because of his mistaken attitudes. This is another aspect to the relationship humanity had with God in the garden. God had granted them full dominion over the created order and they did not exercise that dominion in the case of the serpent - they could have rejected the serpent's reasoning. The eldest son, for reasons we do not know, did not exercise the dominion over the inheritance that he had been granted. Remember that we were told, ***"So he divided his property between them"*** (Luke 15:12) The elder son had not asked for the inheritance but it was officially granted to him anyway. Even without that transfer as long as he lived with his father he would have had access to that inheritance so, as his father pointed out, 'My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours' (Luke 15:31) We can be like the eldest son and be lost while still at home if we do not avail ourselves of the benefits of Christ's passion.

The error of thinking God is keeping something from us and the error of not recognizing all that God has given us are the two primary ways that humanity has 'missed the mark'. The loving God who created us all has granted to all humanity the permission and responsibility of dominion over the created order. In many and varied ways we have rejected that gift and rejected God in the process. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners in order to attempt to correct that problem and the invitation is open to all who wish to find their way back home. Some will come home after realizing

their folly while others will have to come to the realization that they have misjudged their Father in heaven. We cannot help, it would seem, drawing incorrect conclusions about our Father in heaven and the breakdown in the relationship brings some unwelcome consequences. The younger son's life certainly did not turn out the way he had hoped when we walked out of his father's house and the elder son's life did not contain the joy that it could have because of their unwillingness to really get to know their father. Jesus offers us the chance to grow in our understanding of what the Creator of the Universe is like and Jesus has provided the way for us to return to that right relationship with God. This movement will require, like the younger son, an admission on our part that we have gotten it wrong. His plan had failed and he cried out for mercy. The answer was an unexpected restoration of his full status as a son of the father. We are not told but we hope that the elder son went through a similar admission that he had fallen into a misunderstanding because that is what some of us need to do. God wishes for all humanity to come back into a loving relationship with their Creator with the goal being for their to be one flock and one shepherd, for all the lost sheep to be gathered and ministered to by God who loves us more than we realize. His call for us to return is sometimes delivered through the actions of kindness that we receive, sometimes delivered through being accepted into a circle of love, sometimes delivered in the still small voice of God in the quiet of our hearts.

As we continue to journey through this season of Lent may we hear the call of the shepherd and, if we have strayed, find our way back home where he is waiting with open arms to restore us in fellowship. Or, if we are lost at home, may we open our eyes to the wonder of belonging to the family of God and learn to enjoy the 'benefits of Christ's passion.

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