

03.27.22 Luke 15: 1 - 3, 11b - 32

This has been a difficult Lenten season. Lent is supposed to be solemn, reflective time which as an intentional time of preparation for the joyful wonder of Easter. But this has been a difficult Lenten season, hasn't it? Ash Wednesday when I began my to exercise my spiritual will power by voluntary sacrifice of bread, or at least pretzels. I have done well with the pretzels (not one has crossed my lips) but less good with giving up bread. Then there are the Scriptures upon which our worship services were constructed: the wilderness temptation with hunger and loneliness and the allure of the devil, the terrible slaughter on the temple steps and the tragic collapse of the tower in Jerusalem - these are not easy contemplate even with the victory of Jesus over the devil's temptation, and the promise of grace triumphing over sin in death. I knew today's parable of the Prodigal Son was on the calendar for this morning, a parable of the lost child returning to the embrace of his loving father. The lost is found and a joyous celebration breaks out. But opening the Bible as together we did this morning, we heard, "There was a man who had two sons"

The older boy first appears in the story out in the field when, walking home after day's work, he hears the commotion of the party. What's going on? He is told about the return of his brother, and all the fuss his father was making over this prodigal. He heard how his father hiked up his robe and ran out to meet the prodigal. If you can imagine Queen Elizabeth at her age, grabbing the fabric of her dress and running across the street to greet a homeless person, you get how shameful it was for the older son to learn of his father's behavior. He was offended as I imaging the British would be if the Queen took off running. How angry he is, so angry he won't go into the party but stays standing in the deepening dusk of the evening in outer courtyard of the house, sulking and fuming and just mad as all get out. And there it is.

The older brother did not know what it was like to be lost as was his younger brother, but he was lost himself nonetheless. His heart had hardened against his brother, against his father, against a new beginning, against everything in the moment that represented love and forgiveness and restoration of affection. While he never left home at all he was just as absent as was the little brother - physically present but spiritually and emotionally absent. How could this happen? He had his father's intimate presence, he lived surrounded by his father's love. (Son, says the father, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours). The younger son remembered his father's love and came crawling home, the older son had the same memories of that love but it made no difference. He would rather stay out in the gloomy courtyard, nursing his anger. It is so unfair. He never misbehaved. He always did the right thing. He was an obedient son, and he was as empty of love as were the empty husks his younger brother fed to the swine in the slop in the far away and foreign land.

Still, though, the father loved him, too. "With an open and expectant heart, the father waits for the return of the wandering heart of his older son. He waits for and forgives the older son whose heart wandered away even though he himself never left home. The father waits for and loves both of his children, and yearns for reunion with them around the supper table when the past will be forgotten and the future not as important as the present moment when they are together. This is the hope of the father of both the sinful children. And in this parable of the Prodigal Son, the father figure is Jesus who eats with sinners gladly, and who begs Pharisees and scribes to join in the celebration. For your brothers, your sisters, your family near at hand and your neighbors across the ocean were dead in sin, but now in Christ are alive.

If we know what it is like to be lost, then we also know what it is like to be found. If we know what it means to be lost because our hearts have drifted away from our God, then we, too, may know what it means to be found. It is as if you finally come home after a long protracted absence. Your heavenly father awaits your return with all the longing and yearning of an anguished parent, ready to sweep you into his arms and pull you in close in a welcoming hug. Why then do we hesitate? Perhaps we do not trust in God's love? We need to trust in God's love.

'A True love that can neither falter nor be quenched' is a phrase used by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom to describe the love the the father in this parable. It is also an important part of true repentance. True repentance 'blends together the vision of one's own evil and the certainty that there is forgiveness even for us because true love can neither falter nor be quenched. (Mediations, p 78) It was the mingling of visions of his own sin with the certainty (hoped for???) of his father's love that was the cause of the joyous celebration in the father's house, for he who had been lost through sin had been found through forgiveness.

Jesus begs the Pharisees. He begs all of us sinners of the worldly kind and sinners of the religious kind. Come in from the foreign country of misery, and come in from the backyard of hard-earned merit. Both are deadly. But inside is the banquet of grace, and forgiveness, and fellowship with an all-satisfying Father. Receive an inheritance unfading, undefiled, incorruptible, kept in heaven for all who live by faith in grace and not by earning merit.

The time to come to our senses, the time to come home, is now. Come home, to God in Christ. He is waiting for us. Amen.