

Sermon Lent 4C Joint Worship Service @ Saint Paul Episcopal Church
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I was Lost and Now I'm Found

Today's Gospel lesson features a famous parable from the Gospel of Luke - the only Gospel that includes the parable of the prodigal son. This long parable concludes a series of three parables having to do with lost sheep, coins and sons.

All three stories are told by Jesus to Sinners and Tax Collectors - two of the most despised groups in ancient Israel. The Pharisees, the Jewish high priests, were getting increasingly agitated that Jesus was cavorting with these dreaded Gentiles. Yet, Jesus persisted as his mandate from God was and is to serve ALL with his healing and teaching ministry, with a special emphasis on the marginalized and the poor.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep begins the trilogy of parables - Jesus tells the Pharisees and the Scribes about the shepherd who rejoices when his lost sheep returns to his flock of 99 sheep. "Rejoice with me for I have found my lost sheep!" the shepherd proclaims.

The next parable features the story of a woman with 10 coins. Having lost one, she swept the house and searched all over for the missing coin. When she finally finds the coin she rejoices with friends and neighbors, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost!" she proclaims.

These short stories prepare us for the longer parable of the son who squandered half of his father's estate. He sells the land he had been given, moves to a distant land and cavorts with prostitutes. Clearly he is not following his father's plan for his life. Running out of cash and starving, he

goes to work in a pig pen. Pigs are reviled by Jewish people. He has stooped as low as he can go - and his employer won't let him eat the slop he is feeding to the pigs.

Disgusted with himself and realizing he can no longer live as he has, he returns home hungry and broke to beg for forgiveness. Rather than be scolded or scorned by his father which would have been customary in the Jewish patriarchal tradition, his father runs up to his younger son when he sees him walking home, kisses and embraces him with JOY.

When we reflected on this parable during Bible Study, a participant commented that the love of a parent to his or her child is UNCONDITIONAL, like God's love for each of us. That insight prompted a great discussion on whether there was a prodigal sibling in our families and how our parents responded.

The older son didn't think it was so great that his wayward younger brother had returned. He complains to his father "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you and I have never disobeyed your command, ... When this younger son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" You can just hear the feelings of injustice and hurt in the older son's voice.

His father assures his older son: "Son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours (indicating the younger son would no longer receive a portion of his father's estate as he spent it already) 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."

For anyone who has lost something very special to them - only to regain it later, we can relate to the joy of being reunited with the person or items we thought were lost.

In today's world, how many of us have "lost" or temporarily displaced our phones, our keys, our wallets or a letter from someone special. We search everywhere, activate our digital devices to find the lost one - and rejoice when we are reunited.

That feeling can help us understand the joy expressed in these three parables.

So why did Jesus tell these three stories to sinners and tax collectors? A fair question.

Theologian Rodney Clapp offers this perspective:

"Behind Jesus' parable lies profound and overwhelming truth about God and God's kingdom. We humans, we all were lost, mired in sins of sensuality and greed and self-absorbed resentment, hip deep in the pig slop of envy. God reached out in the people of Israel and then in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God raised us up and called us home. It is not about you and me, or my sin and your sin...It is about God and God's life-giving love and MERCY. Every time God's active, stretching, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it does not mean there is LESS for the rest of us. It means there is MORE. More wine. More feasting. More music. More dancing. ... a bigger party."

These three parables speak to the generosity of God's love. God cares about

the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son and wants to help us reunite with our loved ones.

It's fitting that we reflect on these parables of JOY on Laetere Sunday.

The fourth Sunday of Lent has been celebrated as Laetere Sunday since the 12th century. Parishioners are invited to break their Lenten fast and celebrate that Lent is almost over. Think of it as the Seventh Inning Stretch during Lent. Gaudete Sunday is similar - which marks the 3rd Sunday of Advent. The Latin word Laetere means REJOICE. On this day, the church is called to be joyful, filled with anticipation of Easter and the victory over death that Christ's resurrection represents. We're allowed to eat sweets and other specialities we may have given up for Lent.

My rose vestments were a gift from Saint Luke - and I wear them joyfully and gratefully. And I am particularly grateful to celebrate Laetere Sunday with all of you - the faithful people of my two beloved parishes.

We can't forget though that this has been a difficult Lent for many people. You may be feeling lost due to losing your job or feeling like your money doesn't go far enough to feed your family due to rising prices and shortages of eggs due to the avian flu killing thousands of chickens. Demand for free food from the Columbia Food Bank and every food bank in our country is at an all time high. We are being called to serve our neighbors in new ways. Do we do this out of fear for ourselves, or out of JOY, as an expression of God's love that we want to share.

We know from Jesus' example that by giving generously out of LOVE for our neighbors, we will reap rewards in heaven and on earth.

The prodigal son parable is also an illustration of the JOY that comes through forgiveness. The younger son returned and had a speech prepared in his head to beg his father for forgiveness. He had realized the errors of his impulsive self-centered ways.

When his father surprised him by lavishing him with love and a special feast, the younger son experienced METANOIA - a spiritual transformation, a change in mindset and beliefs.

No longer viewing his father or family tradition with spite, he realized that he loved his father and his older brother and needed their support and companionship in order to thrive.

Parental love may be the closest we come to the love of God during our lifetimes. Not all families are loving and kind. Our families of faith, Saint Paul and Saint Luke, aspire to be ambassadors of Christ's unconditional love. When we truly live into our discipleship as agents of God's love, we experience a profound joy. The joy of being right with God.

Our former Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, wrote and spoke extensively about the life-giving and liberating love of God. While serving as Presiding Bishop he led the creation of a spiritual practice called the **Way of Love**: a 7 Step devotional practice to help us walk lovingly in Christ's path.

When he was Bishop of North Carolina, Curry wrote about the Prodigal Son parable:

“In the end, this parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion and justice of God, deeper, wider and higher than our imaginings.”

He closed his essay with an excerpt from the late Archbishop of South Africa Desmond Tutu’s book **GOD HAS A DREAM.**

“I have a dream, God says. Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice, goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing... (when) swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. My children will know that they are members of ONE family, the HUMAN family, God’s family, MY Family.”

Tutu’s dream can only be realized when we truly love one another as Christ loves us. When we recognize that we were lost and now are found.

And the people say AMEN.