

#17 15-16

Psalm 32

Joshua 5:9-12

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Coming to Ourselves

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.'"

If you noticed, there was a big gap in this 15th Chapter of Luke reading . . . they skipped the verses between the 3rd verse and the 11th. In these were the parables of the lost sheep (where the 99 sheep were left while the shepherd looked for, found and rejoiced over the one found sheep), and the lost silver coin (which was searched for, found and rejoiced over as well). The three of these, lumped together, have been called by some scholars, "The parable of the lost."

And since the first two, the sheep and the coin, do not have the capacity to repent, many theologians have suggested that one aspect of our modern day understanding of this scripture that gets lost, is that this story is not so much about repentance, as it is about the "searching for true life", and "the joy when one finds it" - the Search and Joy parts of Faith.

When we think of the parables of the lost as being about searching and joy, then the rationale for having this text during Lent becomes so clear! Lent is when we search into ourselves to find that which gives us life!

Suzanne Guthrie: "Lent gives me time to find myself- my true self - for better or for worse, and usually both. Lent gives me time to work on habits that alienate me from myself, and from God, and from my loved ones. I learn to see the "edited" version of myself for what it is, and to step back from the "cult of this shadow" I've created of myself. Lent teaches me to wake up in the middle of the waking day to a fuller awareness of my state of mind, to repent, to turn around toward the Loving Presence watching for me. Lent teaches me the subversion of loving and being loved. Lent prepares me to accept my authentic self, which is love."

In our parable of the Prodigal son, the younger son sought to find his true life and was willing to leave the security of all he knew - all that which gave him a sense of belonging and worth - and he set off to live his life more fully than he felt he could in his family home. He wasn't thinking about how it would affect his father or brother or anyone else - he wanted to live life, so he took off! And as fate would have it, things did not go well for him, he lost all he had and then, on top of everything else, there was a natural disaster that affected everyone! A famine! So people may not have been feeling so compassionate and generous. His life spirals down, and then he remembers where he belonged, where people valued him not for what he had, but for who he was, and in our scriptures it says, "he came to himself."

I love this phrase, "he came to himself." How many of us have experienced those moments when suddenly, or even slowly, we came to see ourselves as though we were waking up from a bad dream, and we realized, that we were wrong about someone, or something . . . or that we were angry, but really what was going on was, we were actually afraid? Moments where we may have been feeling a bit embarrassed or ashamed of how we acted . . . where we wish we hadn't said or done . . . that . . .? Those are the moments of coming to ourselves, when we realize our need for the amazing grace that God offers us.

And we then must choose ~ either we acknowledge our experience of not being who we wanted to be, or we can ignore the revelation of coming to ourselves and take the chance of allowing the lesson to remain unlearned. The problem then, is that we will not experience the joy that was spoken of when the shepherd found the sheep, the woman found her coin, and the Father found his son. As painful as attempted repentance and reconciliation may be, the joy that comes from the return to God, to each other, and to ourselves makes it so worth the pain! For when we can face our own sins, our own moments of regret and shame, we recover parts of ourselves and we are more fully divine! We can offer grace to others! We do experience the power of loving and respecting ourselves - and we can do the same for others!

Frederick Buechner - "It is important at least to tell from time to time the secret of who we truly and fully are—even if we tell it only to ourselves—because otherwise we run the risk of losing track of who we truly and fully are and little by little come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing."

One problem with this prodigal son story - in comparison to the other things that were lost, is that no one judges the sheep or the coin for getting lost, but we "should" all over humans, and the emotions go all over the place for humans. We bring in our story into this parable ~ we can't help but side with someone . . . "That entitled Brat!" "That unloving brother!" And we all want to be like the Father . . . and hope we will be like the Father to our own children . . . that is understandable! But, let's say it wasn't a Father/son relationship and we witnessed some acquaintance do the same thing ~ would we be judging the young man more quickly?

Bruce Epperly: "There is, however, as Thomas Merton says, a 'hidden wholeness.' There is something of God in each of us, a still small voice, the whisper of sighs too deep for words, an undercurrent of grace, and somehow in his debauchery and destructiveness, this young man hears the call of home. He's squandered everything, lost his spirit and place in society, and has nothing to offer. He's old despite his youth, worn out, torn up, and devalued, even to himself. He's lost all self-esteem, and has nothing to offer, even to his parents. He doubts his parents even love him anymore."

Sometimes it seems like the degree of grace we are willing to offer someone, depends on how much we know and care for the person. Strangers are so much easier to judge than those people we know and love. And the point that Christ was teaching, was that just as we are able to search and rejoice over lost animals and things without judging the entity, God is also searching and rejoicing over us humans when we finally come to know we belong to God! God is hoping that we will seek and find ways to be more like the Father in this story . . . to strive to understand the feelings of each other without judgment, and find ways to let everyone know that they BELONG to us! That regardless - every child of God is worthy of love. When we come to ourselves, we are also coming into God, belonging, worthy, beloved! And our calling as brothers and sisters in Christ is to live our lives in such a way as to make everyone we meet, feel as though they are worthy and belong!!