



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Do we see God running toward us?”

Lent 4C – March 30, 2025

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

A Homily by The Rev'd Jo Popham

This fourth Sunday in Lent is called Laetare Sunday or Rose Sunday, and rather like the third Sunday of Advent when we have a break in an otherwise penitential season. The vestments for this day are rose and flowers may adorn the Altar. Throughout Lent we have not heard much rejoicing, rather we have heard of our need to repent. Why? So that we are not separated from the love of God. In the Gospel of Luke today we have a reprieve from all the Lenten repentance stories. In Jesus's parable of the prodigal son we clearly learn that Jesus's love is for all people. That is our model – God's love for Jerusalem – Jerusalem – the mother of us all. In England this 4th Sunday is called Mothering Sunday. Today – the 4th Sunday in Lent – we rejoice because God's unconditional love is intended for everyone – just as Jesus taught and teaches still.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the best known teachings of our Lord. It would have been told and told over and over in the 1st century, and still is told often today. It is rather like our own family stories that we tell and retell over the dining table when everyone is gathered. Remember when – we begin. I don't often tell my prodigal son story, because it recalls a time of pain for Jim and me. In his last year of high school one of our sons left home one spring while we were at a week long out of town meeting. He did not return until the middle of that summer. He lived on the mean streets of Washington, D.C. for four months. 5 o'clock was the time when I would fall into despair not knowing if he had a place to sleep that night. Thankfully Jim convinced him to call around 5 to let me know he had a sofa to sleep on for the night. And finally – on my birthday – that July, he called and said he would like to have parents again. When he came home we did celebrate. I don't remember barbequing a fatted calf, but we surely went shopping for clothes – modern robes and sandals. He had lost most of his

belongings along the way, but he had held onto a small wooden box with a tile mosaic of two fish on it that I had given him. Inside were the few things that he treasured and a single lens reflex 35 mm Pentax camera that Jim had given him that he had used to document his journey. We have not yet heard all of his adventures. But, I suppose because we look very alike, for years after, street people would come up to me and ask if I had a really tall son. They said “He took my picture” and “He gave me his gloves one day.” Another homeless man said that he had given him his coat. Another said “I met him one morning when he was handing out bagels on the street corner.” That day he had bread enough to spare. But there were days when he didn’t know how he would survive. But, thanks be to God, he did. My son who was lost found his way home.

Where do we find ourselves in these two prodigal son stories? I find that by recalling my story about my own son’s return, I feel once more my failure and redemption and my fear and hope and always I feel forgiveness. What do we hear in the telling of the parable of the prodigal son this time? Do we find ourselves fearful or filled with grief for the times that we have left God to pursue our own fortunes? Do we rejoice – and even laugh – at the picture of God running down the road – arms open wide – to greet us – to welcome us home? Do we find value in hearing this wonderful story over and over again? How has this story shaped us over the years? What do we hear this time? Anything new?

For this telling of the prodigal son’s story, I go back to the reason that Jesus told this parable. New meanings are revealed with every reading of the same stories we treasure and read again and again. With this reading I was reminded that earlier Jesus had been invited to the table of the leader of the Pharisees – the crème de la crème of society. And later he was surrounded by outcasts. Jesus was speaking with tax collectors and sinners who had gathered to hear him when the Pharisees and scribes in the crowd murmured – they grumbled – they muttered. They whined about Jesus eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors – even street people. These were the dregs of society in the first century. It was scandalous that Jesus not only spoke with these outcasts, but that he

shared table fellowship with them, and even played host to them. The scribes complained to the disciples: Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Why did Jesus and the disciples keep company with “those people?” The Pharisees really had a problem with God’s merciful grace. They were very versed in the Hebrew Bible. They would have heard in Jesus’s parable echoes back to the other brother stories of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-4), of Ishmael and Isaac (21:9), of Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:27-34, 27:1-26), and of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37:1-4). Sibling rivalry and the strained relationships between brothers were part of the Israelites heritage. Ironically, in all these stories it was the younger sons who were favored – when in their culture it was the elder son who was favored.

The younger “prodigal” son stepped outside the ordinary and asked for his inheritance. Two things make this request so unusual. In 1st century Palestine, to ask for his share of his father’s estate while the father lived was unheard of, because it would have been as though to him the father was already dead. And in Jesus’s day at the father’s death the elder son would have received twice as much as the younger. Now a father could abdicate before his death and divide his wealth, but to do so equally, giving the younger son half as his inheritance, was way outside the norm. The younger received what would eventually have belonged to him and more. After he had squandered his father’s money and found himself in dire need, he resorted to feeding pigs – which would have been the ultimate indignity for a Jew because pigs were a symbol of pagan religions and Roman rule. But this son remembered his father’s love and goodness, and he hoped to return home and would have been happy to work as a servant for his father. But seeing his lost son from afar, the father ran to him and embraced him and kissed him. The son confessed his sins, and he was welcomed home.

To the Pharisees sinners were not just those who broke moral laws but also those who did not maintain the ritual purity practiced by the Pharisees – household laws that kept the Pharisees separated from the rest of society. To them this prodigal son had been

reckless with his father's money. And he had consorted with the unwashed of society. He was a sinner who did not deserve God's mercy or love.

So, does God's grace really extend to the undeserving? And who are we to determine who is and is not deserving. At the end of time, I wonder if we will be happy to share the Kingdom of God with all the reformed sinners that Jesus welcomed? Will we be able to accept that God loves "those people" as much as God loves us? Can we accept the challenge to be like God and run with open arms towards the lost, those who have been bullied, those who have been discriminated against because of who they love, those who didn't go to elite schools, those who don't speak the King's English, those who are just seekers and doubters among us, even those who mistreated others? We have so much to offer here in Destin, being filled with God's love and God's joy. As we journey to a new place to worship – wherever that is – let us gather all those who need a place to worship. Let us welcome them as we welcome one another with open arms.

I trust that you all have come to understand why I share my stories with you in the context of interpreting Holy Scripture. It is so that you can use your own real life stories as means to enter into Jesus's stories. My prayer is that our stories and Jesus's parables become one. Through our own melded prodigal son stories, may we come to accept all people as God's people. And when we come into God's Kingdom may we be pleasantly surprised to see tax collectors and sinners, street people and church people, and even other Episcopalians, at the table with us.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.