



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 27, 2022
JOSHUA 5:9-12; PSALM 32; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21; LUKE 15:1-3, 11b-32

EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY AND KNOWING GLANCES



Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 [All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus 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.'"

I once took a backpacking trip that involved six nights in the back country which meant needing to pack enough food and supplies to last the week. I erred on the side of carrying too much, which I suppose is better than the alternative, but it made for a difficult load that led to a host of physical symptoms on the trail. The body memories come rushing back even forty years later when I think about, but the happy memories of seeing the trip through with friends are intermingled, so I hold it all together even now, when I am happy for younger souls to sort their backpacks, and I will happily stick to day hikes and the comforts of a hot shower and my own bed!

I share that image of an overloaded backpack as an analogy for the swirl of emotions we are all carrying about as we navigate the unfamiliar trails of the pandemic, social

decay and violence, racial reckoning, the escalating threat of war, and the changing landscape of a traumatized existence in the face of it all.

Our children are not immune from it either, and there is a weight we are bearing societally, and in families and as individuals. Anxiety, fear, restlessness, agitation, uncertainty, perhaps even at times despair and a struggle to find a hopeful path forward. It's all a lot to hold, to carry, and what is common then, amidst this barrage of emotional burden, is the impulse to find the pressure valve of anger as a way of coping. It's the psyche's way of seeking release—for some it erupts in full-blown outbursts and physical violence, but for most of us it's more a low-simmering anger that has piggy-backed as we make our way through life in these unsettled times.

I believe the important spiritual work of these challenging times involves learning the vocabulary of our emotions if we are to speak our truth into the crucible moment with any measure of poetic grace. It is the church's collective work, too, as we strive to speak a calm and fortifying word of hope into our broken, hurting world that seems on the cusp of a full boil of anger.

Emotional vocabulary is also the lens through which I found myself reading this parable of the prodigal son this week once more. Perhaps the best known parable of all, and therefore the one whose familiarity risks hiding its truth right before our eyes, I've always angled in on the story for its narrative details, its defining triangle of characters, and its brilliant plot schemes. They are beautiful, to be sure, and they give the story its lasting quality and influence, but I discovered this week, perhaps for the first time, just how much emotional burden is contained in these several verses halfway through Luke's gospel.

Jesus tells the story in response to the grumbling launched in his direction about the company he keeps. So there's anger in the air, righteous anger.

The story disarms us with its threads that easily weave into our own lives. Rare is the family that does not have a prodigal story of pain. In Jesus' version, what emotional angst

caused the younger son to ask his father for his inheritance—the cultural equivalent of his saying he wished his father were dead? What pangs of grief must the father have felt in that moment!

But instead of the father dying, something in the son dies a slow ignominious death as he squanders his life away in distant lands that only care for his consumptive capacity. Once depleted, what emotions must he have processed along the way, as things spiraled down, finally deciding to return to his father's house as a last resort?

We don't get those emotional details, but we can surely conjure them because we all know the very human impulses to rationalize and justify our flawed decisions before coming to terms with the desperate need to change. Earlier I said we were all packing a lot: anxiety, fear, restlessness, agitation, uncertainty, anger, perhaps even at times despair and a struggle to find a hopeful path forward. The prodigal son peers into our eyes knowingly, and asks the haunting question of spiritual disintegration: can we please go home now?

And then we are told the elder son, who had kept faithful watch through it all, is so angry he refuses to go into the house when his brother returns. The elder son has lost his way, too, in his own backyard, his vision

blurred by anger, yes—a searing wrath crusting over a festering emotional wound of his own—perhaps involving grief for his lost brother (grief which manifest as anger for the abandonment), perhaps jealousy for the road he did not get to take, perhaps sorrow for the estranged feelings that come when his father shows such delight for the prodigal’s return. He’s so busy keeping track of his scoresheet of naughty and nice that he is willing to miss the party, content instead to stroke his offended ego alone, grumbling. He is hurt and disoriented by the whole affair, and if we linger with him in the outer orbits of the story, in time our eyes meet his in a knowing exchange of bitterness. Life’s just not fair.

But notice that the father does not wait for either son to come to him; he runs to greet his younger son on the road. The effusive welcome, the radical hospitality, the profligate forgiveness all bundled together by his undying love and boundless mercy, and unwavering hope that this moment of return would come, in the fullness of time it took his child to arrive at it.

And rather than let the elder son fester in his self-imposed exile of wounded anger, the parent goes to him with an abundant supply of that same love and mercy and hope for him.

The abiding gift of this parable is the effusive quality of God’s love and mercy and hope for us all, wherever we find ourselves, and for whatever reason—in the lands of foreign desolation or the ambit of localized weariness, and certainly wherever the simmers of anger touch us in these difficult days. The joyous delight in one of us is not mutually exclusive to any other. There is no depletion of the resource of God’s delight in you and me. There is balm enough for all our wounds; there is a wideness in God’s mercy; and “the love of God is broader than the measures of the mind.”ⁱⁱ

For in the end, God looks knowingly into our eyes, and sees the beautiful being created for love, and says, welcome home, my beloved. Welcome home.

ⁱ <https://thevalueofsparrows.wordpress.com/2014/03/27/the-prodigal-son-the-prodigal-son-and-reconciliation-by-joel-w-huffstetler/>

ⁱⁱ Lyrics from the well-known hymn, [There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy](#).