

Lent IV (C)  
Trinity Parish Seattle  
March 6, 2016

Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Happy Laetare Sunday – Laetare, Jerusalem! This word is taken from the Latin translation of Isaiah 66:10 – and is the traditional introit at the beginning of the mass for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent. Rejoice, O Jerusalem! Today is the middle of Lent – and if we had rose colored vestments we would be wearing them today – a day to lighten the penitential burden – and rejoice!

This is also known as Mothering Sunday in some places – a day observed in England and parts of Europe. During the sixteenth century, people returned to their mother church on Laetare Sunday. This was either the church where you were baptized, or the local parish church, or more often the nearest cathedral. Anyone who did this was commonly said to have gone “a-mothering.” In its more secular application, it became a day to honor the mothers of children and is simply referred to as Mother’s Day in some places now (thanks to Hallmark). And I’m happy to remember this day as the birthday of my own mother (may peace be upon her).

It’s also the day when in our lectionary we hear a story I never tire of hearing – one that is traditionally referred to as the parable of The Prodigal Son. It is a parable that is immortalized in popular references. Some of us may have been one, or had one, or known one. That would probably include just about all of us.

This parable has been immortalized in many works of art – none more powerful than Rembrandt’s Return of the Prodigal Son which hangs in The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. It is a renowned work described by art historian Kenneth Clark as “a picture which those who have seen the original in Leningrad may be forgiven for claiming as the greatest picture ever painted.”<sup>1</sup>

In the painting, the son has returned home in a wretched state from his wanderings. He has wasted his inheritance. He has ended up not only in abject poverty, but working in the lowest and most un-kosher of jobs feeding pigs. There was nothing lower. He kneels before his father in repentance, asking for forgiveness and an opportunity to rejoin the family, having realized that even his father's servants had a better life than he.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John Durham, *The Biblical Rembrandt: human painter in a landscape of faith*. Mercer University Press, (2004), p. 183.

In this painting we see his father receiving him with a tender gesture. His hands seem to suggest both mothering and fathering at once; the left hand appears larger and more masculine, set on the son's shoulder, while the right is softer and more receptive in its gesture.<sup>2</sup> Standing at the right is the older brother, who crosses his hands in judgment. In the parable he objects to the father's compassion for the wayward son, saying to his father, "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." (Luke 15:29–30)

The father explains, "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." (Luke 15:32)

Three very different characters. Three very different personalities. It's fun in a Bible study group to read this parable and then ask the question, "Okay, which one of these characters do you identify with?" And people generally feel very distinct connections with one of these three characters. People who have been through hard times, perhaps were the rebellious one in the family, know what the younger son feels like and can identify with him. Those of us who were "the responsible ones" more easily identify with the older son. And occasionally someone will identify with the father in the story, who extends a loving hand of forgiveness and acceptance.

And it's amazing how we tend to see the positive qualities in the one with whom we identify, and the negative or shadow side of the others. If you identify with the prodigal, you see his coming to his senses, his willingness to ask for forgiveness and turn his life around, his humility in hoping that he might just have a roof over his head again, and gain a place as a servant back home. You love the fact that his father runs to him and embraces him as he comes crawling back home after a bad patch in life. And you see the older brother as being judgmental and self-righteous, a risk-averse, play-it-safe people pleaser, and the one who will never let you forget just how unworthy you really are.

And if you identify with the older son see him as the good son who plays by the rules and is justifiably angry when the father throws a party for the brother who threw it all away. And they see the younger son as irresponsible and not to be trusted, one you should not coddle. And they're sure that the father is being co-dependent with the ne'er do well younger son, which will simply enable him to screw up again, then be rewarded with another party when he comes back again.

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<sup>2</sup> John F. A. Sawyer, *The Blackwell companion to the Bible and culture*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p. 313.

But while we are all likely to immediately identify with one or the other, the reality is that there is some of all of them in each one of us. Suzanne Guthrie, who is a priest and astute interpreter of scripture, says this:

I am the son returning again and again. I am the father scanning the horizon watching for the impossible and then embracing it in my arms. I am the revelers in the far-away town, I am the servants in the father's household, and I am the older brother in tears of rage, uncomprehending and exasperated.

[She continues:] 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.<sup>3</sup>

I was privileged to have Henri Nouwen as a professor in seminary. He was a Dutch Roman Catholic priest who taught both at Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools for several years and was the author of many books. We joked that Henri never had an unpublished thought. In 1992 he wrote a book about Rembrandt's painting following a visit to the Hermitage where he was so deeply taken by this masterpiece. In his book, he says

Rembrandt is as much the elder son of the parable as he is the younger. When, during the last years of his life, he painted both sons in *Return of the Prodigal Son*, he had lived a life in which neither the lostness of the younger son nor the lostness of the elder son was alien to him. Both needed healing and forgiveness. Both needed to come home. Both needed the embrace of a forgiving father. But from the story itself, as well as from Rembrandt's painting, it is clear that the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home.<sup>4</sup>

There is a sense in which we prejudice the meaning of the parable by calling it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, because it's ultimately a story not about one son or the other, but about a loving and merciful parent – an image of the God in whose image we are all made, and toward whom we must move to find our true and authentic self. So I'm going to suggest that in spite of what our various versions of the Bible might print at the top of this parable, we begin to call it the Parable of the Merciful Parent. This is the

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<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Guthrie in *The Edge of the Enclosure* (<http://edgeofenclosure.org/lent4c.html>)

<sup>4</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (1992), pp. 65-66.

God who invites us all – the unrighteous and the self-righteous – to return to the heart of love and mercy that is our true nature and our most authentic self.

There's a very simple yet beautiful statue of The Merciful Parent in a corner of the Bishop's Garden at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. I came upon it by chance on a visit there many years ago, and was moved deeply by it. The embrace of the father nearly envelopes the whole being of the prodigal. I was the parent of two young children at the time, and could easily imagine myself holding them in that tender embrace.

I had grown up being the dutiful eldest son, who rarely if ever broke the rules (and was good at hiding it if I did). And I didn't yet know what it would be like for me to have a child who did break the rules. I learned. I didn't know just how hard that would be for me – how hard I would have to work to let go of my judgmental thoughts, and learn to see through the eyes of my child the withering specter of my disapproving gaze. It was hard work. But I have learned so much from that experience. It's part of my own journey from being lost to being found, a journey that continues still – and so it is for us all. We're all on a journey in this life to reclaim the love and the mercy that is our most authentic self.

So yes, Lent can be a time for rejoicing! And this is a day for that. The one who was lost has been found! And may it be so for every one of us.