

Sermon: Lent 4

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 6, 2016

Year C

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

On this special Sunday in Lent... on this lighter Sunday... on this Laetare Sunday... when we would use rose colored paraments and vestments if we had them... we give ourselves a break from the heaviness of Lent... we remember to go easy on ourselves... and each other... we remember the promise of God's reconciliation and love...

And after all the self-help readings I've done... after the pastoral care classes I had in seminary... now that I'm with my third spiritual director... no... I didn't wear the other two out... and after all the therapy I've been through... I continue to believe that it's harder to feel that love... to have a bright and glorious Gospel life up here... without shining some light into the family of origin issues we've inherited down here...

In her book The Five Freedoms... therapist Virginia Satir lists five empowering ways we can be healthier... by taking:

- 1) The freedom to see and hear what is here and now... instead of what should be... or was... or will be.
- 2) The freedom to feel what you feel... instead of what you "ought" to feel.
- 3) The freedom to speak what you feel and think... instead of what others say you "should" feel and think.
- 4) The freedom to ask for what you want... instead of always waiting for permission; and
- 5) The freedom to take risks on you own behalf... instead of just maintaining the *status quo*.

This is hard work... I know... even though I'm not finished... but until we begin it... until we're more comfortable being worthy in our own unworthiness... we may dismiss... diminish... and reject the love that comes to us from others... and the love that comes to us from God... there's a song by Brendan James... that conveys some of this tension... it's called Nothing But Love... it begins: *My biggest fear... is I'll let people down... and maybe they'll think less of me... especially you... you're the jewel in my crown... and I don't want to mess this up...*

But we will mess up... and some people will feel disappointed... some of that disappointment is unwarranted though... because it comes [1] when others don't want us to engage the five freedoms... when they want us to *be and do*... what *they want us* to be and do... instead of what we want ourselves to be and do...

[2] some of that disappointment comes when those who love us... when those who want the very best for us... whatever that may be... believe that we're not giving it our best effort... and

[3] some of that disappointment rises up from within us... when in spite of ourselves... in spite of our best efforts... and because we are simply... human... we do mess up... we do miss the mark... and it's this latter focus... that's the focus of today's lessons...

The son said to his Father... let me say Kaddish for you... the prayer for the dead... you're dead to me anyway... let me have my inheritance so I can get out of here... and finally live my life the way I want to... out from under your roof... out from under your expectations of me...

The Father gave him his inheritance... and the son left... gave no value to the land that would have been his... but he travelled abroad... and lived recklessly... and squandered his property... after all... he was so young that his brain had not yet

established all of its neural pathways... and like all young people... he was incapable of assessing risk... he felt invulnerable... and he was determined to prove it...

But he learned the hard way that people in other places had expectations too... and the rent was higher... the political system was corrupt... and to top it off... changes in the environment kept the rains from coming like they did down in Africa... and there was a drought... and a famine...

It was hard for him... very hard... he was so very prideful... but in his separation... he began to remember how good he'd once had it... and he thought... I've disappointed my Father... I don't expect him to forgive me... I don't expect him to treat me any way but badly... but maybe I can go back and be one of his laborers... I know that they at least have a place to sleep and food to eat... they're not starving the way I am... I'll go home...

His Father had heard stories from the caravan traders about the famine's death toll... it had been years... and he had given up hope of ever seeing his son again... he had already said Kaddish for him... but on this day... he happened to be outside... and as he looked toward the horizon... he saw something in the shimmering haze that caught his eye... you know how it is... when you know someone... when you know their shape... and how they move... you know them from very far away... it's like seeing someone at the other end of an airport concourse... you can't see their face but you know it's them... and his Father knew... he just knew... and he was so filled with love and compassion that in spite of his age... in spite of some creaky joints... in spite of maybe some neuropathy in his feet... he ran headlong to meet his youngest child with love...

I know what it is to be run towards... in 1999... just a few days after I moved out of the house... my former wife called my parents to tell them why we were getting divorced... my conversion to Christianity was hard on them... and I feared that coming out to them would be even harder... in fact... I unknowingly had so much internalized

homophobia... I told my spiritual director that I thought this would kill them... I was not quite ready to deal with it... but the next day... my parents called... my mom said... Jean called to tell us why you were getting divorced... that it's because you think you're gay... I paused... and took a breath... and swallowed hard... really hard... and said... No... it's not that I think I am... I am... and they answered quickly and said that it didn't matter... that they loved me no matter what... and would support me... and that it didn't matter... and I think that if they could have hugged me through the phone... they would have... but in that moment... I was the Prodigal Son... welcomed back once again... from my own self-imposed exile... into the loving hearts of my parents... in spite of whatever reason I could think of... or make up... or use to try to convince myself that I didn't deserve this welcome... this love... this further reconciliation... they had never read Virginia Satir's book... but they knew that second freedom... the freedom to feel what you feel... instead of what some think you "ought" to feel...

And before he heard his son's confession of sin... before he heard his son's claim of unworthiness... before he heard his son's hope that could he just... please be treated like one of the hired hands... the Father ran towards his son... full of compassion... and wanted to celebrate him home... wanted to get rings and robes and sandals... told the slaves to kill the fatted calf... there needed to be a party... maybe like today's Laetare Sunday pot-luck... *laetare* means to rejoice... it's from the Latin Mass... but it also comes from Isaiah 66:10... *rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her... all you who love her... rejoice with her in joy...* it's the joy the shepherd felt when he found the one lost sheep... it's the joy the woman felt when she found her one lost coin... Jesus reminded them... there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents... than over the ninety-nine who need no repentance...

But when the elder brother asks what's going on... he is not amused... you see... the fatted calf really belongs to the elder son... the Father's already given the younger son his entire inheritance... anything that's left really belongs to the elder son... but when the elder son complains... when he refuses to go in... his Father realizes that he's

keeping himself out of community... that's why he says *this brother of yours*... not *my son*... but *your brother*... he wants his two sons to be reconciled... but the elder son wants to focus on recklessness instead of compassion... wants to focus on squandering instead of forgiveness... on equality instead of equity... on fairness instead of justice... but you see... God's justice is not human fairness... like Jonah... who's livid at God for forgiving Nineveh... the elder brother can't get past human measuring sticks... and needs to repent... needs to turn back to God's measuring stick...

And what's so wonderful... is that God can discern the intent of our return... just the mere intent... that faint impulse of intent... even before God can discern our face down the concourse... and God prepares to welcome us... undeserving as we are... even when we are far off...

Pastor Emily Heath wrote: in Lent... we are called home by a God... who will come running down the road just to hold us once more... we turn away not from life... but from those places in life where we are not true to the person God has created us to be... in this season... we find that our failures are indeed real... but that God's love is so much bigger and better than we could have imagined... maybe the only way we could ever truly disappoint God... is by believing that we have messed up too much... to ever be loved by God again...

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