

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
The Fourth Sunday in Lent (C)
Sunday, March 31, 2019

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

Happy Opening Day for last week! I didn't realize it was quite such an event! It is almost a religious festival for some it seems. And, true enough, at the start of a new season all the sins of the previous one are wiped out, and anything is possible once more! Everyone is born again with a new hope! I suspect that the theology of Baseball, if not actually taught in any seminary, is definitely out there! The great devotion that some people have for their sport reminds me of the famous soccer coach of Liverpool FC in the UK called Bill Shankly who once said – "Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that." Actually, although I make light of it, it is not strange that these parallels exist with faith and life. After all, the whole purpose of sport is, like all drama, to create in miniature the challenges and themes of life so that we can see them and be part of them acted out on a stage where people largely don't get too badly hurt. Some of you may remember the song writer Peter Gabriel's hit about an international competition called, "Games without Frontiers, War without Tears."

So today we have one of the most famous and powerful of Jesus' parables as our Gospel reading – The Prodigal Son. When I was a student, I remember that my father used to write to me from time to time and he always included a £5 note to go with the P.S. at the bottom of the letter which invariably read "I enclose a young kid to make merry with your friends." Like most of us I think, he had some sympathy with the older brother in the story who had stayed home, done his duty and worked on the estate. Maybe he also hoped that I might end up being more the older brother than the prodigal!

It is a wonderful parable and one all of us can relate to because, of course, we have all found ourselves at some time in our lives, like the prodigal son, sitting by the swine trough and realizing that we have reduced ourselves to about as low a level as we could ever imagine we could.

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;

There is William Shakespeare sitting by his own particular swine trough in Sonnet 29.

One thing Jesus' seminal story does not tell us though, is just how long the younger son sits by the swine trough. How long it is before he "comes to himself" as Jesus puts it. When you think about it, it could be days, months, or many years.

It seems to me that there are many reasons why we can easily linger at the various swine troughs of our lives.

Anyone who has suffered from an addiction, be it gambling, drugs, or alcohol; or, for that matter, those who are held by any of the many other less obvious, but almost as addictive preoccupations in life, know well, how even the most grimy and desolate and pathetic of swine troughs can be hard indeed to leave.

Why? Well, first there is pride. For the son to go home he has first to be prepared to stand in front of his father, and his disapproving brother and all the household and admit that, yes, they had all been right. Just as they had warned him, his decision to go had indeed turned out to be about the worst idea possible. Next to admitting we are wrong, the shame and hardship of the swine trough can seem tolerable – or so we tell ourselves for a time. How many of us have suffered for many a day rather than admit that we were wrong?

Then there is fear. I knew a man once who worked 60 hours a week for years in a job he found tedious, working for people he didn't like, doing something that meant almost nothing to him, because it paid him well and provided a status and a security that make him feel safe as well as miserable. One day, ten years on, as Jesus says, he came to himself and, as he said to me, he realized that he had been in prison for ten years only to discover that he had locked the door himself and had the key to his dungeon in his pocket all the time. His story was, in fact, very similar to Pilgrim's encounter with the Giant Despair in Pilgrims Progress. The Giant locks up and beats the Pilgrim and his companion in his dark Dungeon trying to persuade them to commit suicide, until Pilgrim prays and it is revealed to him that he too has the key to the prison in his heart. It is called Promise – God's promise to all his children that they remain his no matter what they do or what happens to them. With this key they unlock the dungeon and walk free.

In fact though, I think it is less often despair, and more often a lethargy and a lack of hope that keeps us fixed, looking with envy at the simple innocence of the pigs as they relish the mud, and the rotting food in their trough. We are held by the fact that we know we cannot change the past, and that leads us to doubt that we can ever really change the future. We are familiar with where we are. However bleak it may be, we doubt our ability or our desire to leave it behind.

Jesus says, "When he came to himself he said "How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

"When he came to himself." That is when the sojourn by the swine trough finally comes to an end. When we come to ourselves.

This is an incredibly important saying of Jesus', because in this simple phrase it shows us that Jesus believes in us; believes that all our sins and failures, all our betrayals and cowardly choices, all our mean and selfish ways are not what lies at the heart of who we are. When we come to ourselves, when we come to reconnect with who we really are, Jesus believes that we are still, despite it all, the child God his Father created us to be. Of course, not all may ever come to themselves, sadly, but Jesus believes that all of us can.

It is often said, and I think it is absolutely true, that the Prodigal Son should really be called the parable of the Loving Father. We identify with the son, of course, but the main character of the story is really the

Father. The picture we have focused on this morning is that of the son sitting by the swine trough, but the defining picture in this parable is actually of the father scanning the horizon from his gate and, seeing his bedraggled boy creep slowly homeward, rushing down the road to embrace him.

The key element in coming to himself is that the son remembers his father. And, even in his abject state of self-loathing, he knows that his Father will not turn him away completely. Even if no longer as a son, he retains the sense that his Father will still take him in. This is the only thing that saves him, the only sliver of hope that cannot be extinguished from his heart and soul.

This is true in all our experience in one way or another. It is only the knowledge of someone's love, the knowledge that there is someone somewhere who will take us in, regardless of our state and the choices we have made, that allows us to say 'I will arise, and go.' This can often be the love of another human being. Many a broken person has been saved by such a love. The love of a spouse or a parent or a friend. For many, though, there is no human being that loves them that much. They have just burned too many bridges. The message of this parable, though, is that, even if that is the case, Jesus says there is a Father whose love never wavers, never gives us up, never stops looking for us.

Inspired by Rembrandt's painting "The Prodigal Son," Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Roman Catholic priest, professor, and theologian wrote a book called "The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming."

In it, he describes his own life, like that of the Prodigal Son, in terms of a spiritual journey of return to God.

He describes how much of his life had been an attempt to live the Christian life and to avoid dissipation and self-destruction. He describes that he had failed many times but always tried again.

"Now," he says, "I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not "How am I to find God?" but "How am I to let myself be found by him?" The question is not "How am I to know God?" but "How am I to let myself be known by God?" And, finally, the question is not "How am I to love God?" but "How am I to let myself be loved by God?" God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home."

That is the picture we should take away with us this morning. The picture of God the loving father, looking into the distance to see us, trying to find us, longing for us to come home. It is a picture we should never let go of, so that, the next time we find ourselves sitting by the swine trough, when we at last come to ourselves, it will come to us and save us.

Shakespeare is thinking of a human love in his Sonnet, but his words express just how the Father's love lifts up the most cast down of souls.

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee – and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love rememb' red such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.