

Lent 4C, Saint John's Olney, 31 March 2019
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen
Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; Psalm 32

S.D.G.

Listen to what God is saying to us.

You are my child.

You are written in the palms of my hand.

You are hidden in the shadow of my hand.

I have molded you in the secret of the earth.

I have knitted you together in your mother's womb.

You belong to me.

I am yours. You are mine.

I have called you from eternity and you are the one who is held safe and embraced in love from eternity to eternity.

You belong to me. And I am holding you safe and I want you to know that whatever happens to you, I am always there. I was always there; I am always there; I always will be there and hold you in my embrace.

You are mine. You are my child. You belong to my home. You belong to my intimate life and I will never let you go. I will be faithful to you. (Henri Nouwen, "Lecture")

With those brilliant words of Henri Nouwen we could conclude the sermon right now; he has summed up God's love with clarity and tenderness, and there is little more to be said. But as long as we are all here, let's keep going.

Have you been to a large party, perhaps a wedding, where someone announces that we should all look under our chair to see if there is a card taped to the bottom of the seat, and the lucky person who finds the card gets to take the table flowers home with them. Well what if I announced that we should all look under our pew and the lucky person with a card taped under their seat gets to preach the sermon. The story of the

prodigal son is familiar to most of us so each of you could probably do a decent job of conveying an appropriate message.

And like many preachers, my self included, you would likely focus on the actions of the two sons. They are after all introduced at the start of the story; “There was a man who had two sons.” Though I would suggest that introduction is a bit deceptive.

The clue that we have about this deception is that there are missing verses in this reading. We start in the 15th chapter of Luke with verses 1-3 and then jump to verse 11. What happened in those 7 missing verses? Absent of those verses we could logically focus on the two sons, both of whom have wronged their father. But when we include those missing verses, I believe, we have found the true message that Saint Luke intended.

The stage is set in chapter 15 with Jesus welcoming sinners, even breaking bread with them. Then Jesus tells the first of three parables found in this chapter.

“Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” This is the familiar parable of the lost sheep. This is the story that brings us the image of Jesus cradling a sheep in his arms, or carrying a lamb on his shoulders. He carries the sheep home and calls his friends and neighbors together saying “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

Immediately, Jesus tells a second parable, the parable of the lost coin. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’”

After each of these two parables Jesus reminds his listeners of the joy in heaven over the sinner who repents. There is more joy over the one who repents than the ninety-nine who were righteous.

Then we have the third parable, the one we heard today concerning the two brothers. The actions of each of these brothers can be called into question, they both shamed their father. They both thought first of themselves rather than their family. Neither

brother should be lifted up as an example to follow, yet the father holds a party to rejoice for the brother who was lost and is now found.

The father gives his best robe to his son as a sign to others that he is a member of the family. He gives a signet ring as a symbol of his trust in his son. And he adorns his son's feet with sandals as a sign that his son is a free man, not a servant. There is much rejoicing in heaven and on earth.

This collection of three parables is about God, not the sheep, a coin, or two wayward brothers. This is about God always being there for us. Always welcoming us. Always celebrating our arrival. There is much joy in heaven.

Jesus offers these three parables as assurance that God will be there welcoming the sinner who returns to God. God will even reach out to the sinner, guiding, encouraging, and nudging them back closer to God. And when we do return to God – there will be a party in heaven.

This reading was obviously chosen for its relationship to the Lenten practice of repentance and reconciliation. Lent is a time for each of us to examine our lives and recognize those things that lead us away from God, and celebrate those things that bring us closer to God.

The words of Henri Nouwen that I shared at the beginning of this sermon speak of much more than a repentant sinner returning to God; yes, the repentant sinner is worth celebrating, but Nouwen also speaks of the faithful and of those who are troubled. "You are my child... you belong to me... you are the one who is held safe and embraced in love."

Nouwen speaks clearly of those who are troubled by the challenges of life, by those who are burdened with pain, suffering, or loss. The joy found in heaven is not reserved for the repentant; there is an abundance of joy, and an abundance of celebrations. The joy is shared with those who are no longer overwhelmed by death, pain, illness, oppression, persecution, or abuse. The joy is shared with those who have left their hardships at the altar, with those who have turned to God to carry their burden.

If we truly pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" then we ought to live that way - because there is much joy in heaven.

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Thank you God, for this and for all things.

Amen,