

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

23 E. Airy Street | Norristown PA 19401 | (610) 272-4092



CELEBRATION

Tanya Regli

Text of a Sermon preached the Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 27, 2022

JOSHUA 5:9-12 | PSALM 32

2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21 | LUKE 15:1-3, 11B-32

We just read the third part of a parable Jesus tells. Often referred to as the story of the Prodigal Son. The other two parts, that we didn't read today, are about a lost sheep and a lost coin. In all three parts there is great joy and celebration when the lost lamb, lost coin, and lost son are found. A celebration that includes the entire community! Family, friends, and neighbors.

Sometimes I do have some trouble relating to the part about the Prodigal Son. Perhaps it is because it is about three men, and the only reference to women are as prostitutes. So, I wonder, “Where is the mother or the sisters?” Or maybe my struggle is that I focus on the story of the wayward son instead of the sibling or the parent. It is a story I have heard, seen drawn out in children’s books, and read so many times. Yet, as I ponder on this reading once again, I am reminded of the context. Who is the audience in this story? Who is Jesus telling this story to?

Let’s read the first part of today’s Gospel reading again, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So, he told them this parable, of three parts, each of which deal with the losing, the finding and the celebrating.

I can just picture Jesus hearing the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about the sinners that are gathering to listen to Jesus. The crowds of sinners are straining to see Jesus and slowly getting closer to hear him. Uncomfortably close, complain the Pharisees and scribes. But instead of telling the people to back off Jesus tells this parable. Jesus is speaking directly to the Pharisees, scribes, tax collectors and sinners.

Let’s take a look at the main characters.

The wayward son is a sinner. He has disrespected his father, squandered his money, and is in such bad straights that he is feeding pigs. Even willing to eat their food. An especially shameful task for someone who is Jewish since pigs are considered unclean. He is desperate to return to his father, under any condition, even as a servant. Surely the tax collectors and sinners in the crowd feel seen at this moment as they listen intently to Jesus’ words. They have followed Jesus’ for days for this very reason. To hear the good news that God loves them and wants them back.

The complaining brother is definitely not in a forgiving mood. He is angry. Resentful that his brother is being celebrated when he did not follow the rules. Surely the Pharisees and the scribes feel called out when instead of taking the elder son’s side the father urges him to join in on the rejoicing and celebration of his brother’s return from death

to life, from being lost to being found. They are being asked to see the sinners in the crowd as their siblings. To not only forgive them but share in the joy and celebration of their salvation.

Then there is the father, the model of God's love for us. Filled with compassion at the site of his child. Immediately going into celebration mode, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is found!" The father doesn't demand the elder son celebrate with them; he "pleads" with him to join in. The way we are also called to celebrate with those that have been lost and are now found. To forgive and be reconciled with those who have come seeking forgiveness. It does not take away from the love God has for each of us.

Centuries later Jesus is also telling this parable for us. Why has it been chosen for the fourth Sunday in Lent? Perhaps because during this time we can prepare ourselves by discerning the times we have lost our way, sinning, and needing to find our way back to God and seek forgiveness. Or understand when we are the self-righteous and complaining sibling, forgetting to have love in our heart, to rejoice with those that have found their way back to God. The need for us to be reconciled with our siblings in Christ. But most definitely, no matter what our walk is with Christ this parable reminds us of God's joyous and everlasting love for each one of us.

So don't forget that in all three parts of this parable Jesus calls us to rejoice with God. God is not just inviting us or commanding us to take part in this celebration. God is pleading with us to celebrate. Jesus helps us to understand the delight and pure joy God has in embracing the sinner. In embracing us.

