

St. Thomas's Episcopal Parish
Newark, DE
The Fourth Sunday of Lent & 174th Annual Meeting of St. Thomas's Parish
March 6, 2016/Year C
Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
The Reverend Paul W. Gennett, Jr.

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May my words reveal the greater glory of God.

AMEN

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“But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father...”

The Fourth Sunday in Lent is known as **Refreshment or Lighten Up Sunday** in the church world. It is a little beyond the halfway point of our journey with Jesus and the disciples to Jerusalem ... to the power base of the Temple and the Roman world ... to reveal God's TRUE kingdom come on earth plans ... to an end that no one expected, except Jesus. I was reminded in another reading that this is also known as **Mothering Sunday** in which pilgrims would return to the “mother church” for time of reunion, renewal, and feasting.

For me, **Lighten Up** is less about telling numerous bad church jokes and more about lightening our spiritual loads we carry, still. To come home to God and Jesus in the loving place desired from our very creation, and not in abject guilt, remorse, or shame. Repentance is simply **turning round right again**, or as the Prodigal of today's Gospel, “*But when he came to himself ...*” which could be translated as when **he came to his right mind and was restored to sanity**.

It seems a good thing that this is the day of our 174th Annual Meeting of St. Thomas's Parish. A day for this family of God **to come home, to refresh, renew, and be in relationship with one another again and with our loving creative God.**

Let us come home, together.

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Our stories of Holy Scripture reflect the image and invitation of **homecoming, refreshment, renewal, and restoration into God.**

Joshua takes hold of the mantle of Moses to lead this new generation of God's people emerging from forty years of wandering into the new life of a promised land in which “... *on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land ...*” Now the relationship of God is with ALL God's people to be lived and loved, one with another. **Let us come home, together.**

St. Paul frames the life of faith rises in our life in Jesus who is the Christ of God. By this faith, we are called to be God's new creation, and to **live like this** – *“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;...”* I have a friend who would lovingly remind me that the **bag of rocks** of guilt, remorse, resentments, and anger that I would carry NEVER gets lighter until we **drop the bag and deal with the rocks, one by one.**

The work of **being in Christ** is the work of healing ourselves and others to know God's loving redemption, renewal, and restoration of life together for all. Paul emphasizes this call to **live like this** as he continues, *“Christ God was ...entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us ... be reconciled to God.”* **Let us come home, together.**

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is long heard by many so many times, too often glossed over in our hearing, particularly when the story comes **a little too close to home** than we wish. And THAT is the time God invites us home to listen with God's heart of lovingkindness to prodigal ones in all of us. For me, this story is not just about the one son who leaves, but **three prodigal stories** Jesus hopes will come home to God.

For the younger son, the demand for his share of the father's goods and departure is an offensive act. It is a heartless rejection of the home in which he was born and nurtured, a break with the most precious tradition upheld by the larger community of which he was a part. More than disrespect, it is a betrayal of the values of family and community. **Leaving home** is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe in the eternal embrace of faith in relationship, and that I am indeed part of God's DNA.

When the son **hits his bottom** in life and he came to his right mind, he held on to one thing of that past life – **his sword**, the only remaining mark of his dignity and the nobility of his father's house. Even in the midst of total debasement of all his self-propped up uniqueness and specialness over family and others, he had clung to the truth that he was STILL a son of his father. It is so true in my spiritual life when I get **too large and in charge** without God in all of my life. The farther I move away from the place where God is with me and in me, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me Beloved. The **bag of rocks** grows until I cannot move any farther on my own, hopelessly trapped in the manipulation and power games of our world. Real loneliness comes when we have lost all sense of holding our lives **in common with God.**

Then there is the elder brother who stays with the father. Even though his stayed as **the model son** in his own eyes, he became **a lost one too.** On the outside he did all the things the good son was supposed to do – worked hard, managed the property, fulfilled his obligations – yet spiritually he became increasingly unhappy and unfree. This emerges when confronted by the father's joy at the return of his younger brother. The true self of the brother, his **bag of rocks**, become glaringly visible as a resentful, proud, compassionless, and as selfish as his

younger brother. All that had remained stuffed down explodes of self-righteousness.

The father knows ALL of this about BOTH of his “prodigals” and deeply desires both to **come home again, together**. He wants BOTH to be at table and dance together in his joy. Yet he does not force himself on the elder brother, he cannot take away the **bag of rocks** he alone carries. What is clear is that the love of God is always there, always ready to give and forgive, absolutely independent of our response. The Love of God does not depend on our repentance or changes of life or spirit. The Love of God just is there, waiting ... waiting ... waiting to **come home again, together**.

I did mention THREE prodigal stories. The other prodigals in this story are YOU and I ... **Let us come home, together**.

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If you were a Christian living in the Roman Empire, chances were you would sooner or later find yourself standing in front of an altar to Caesar being invited to put a pinch of incense on the coals of that altar. If you said no, the guards would let you know that you either did it or you died—and not only you, but also every member of your household. Under such circumstances quite a few Christians worshipped Caesar, and when they tried to return to the fellowship of the Christian community they often found their way barred.

Early church leaders allowed that while God certainly had the power to forgive such apostasy, the church should not re-admit them to the body of Christ without a long public period of humiliation. If the church really was Christ’s body, then it was supposed to be without sin. To welcome a tainted person back into fellowship was to defile the whole body. Sounds a bit like the political bantering of Christ’s body and fellowship in our political times.

Only later did less “win/lose, in/out” theologians prevail like Ambrose of Milan and Gregory of Nazianzus. Ambrose argued that to deny anyone, Christian or not, the hope of forgiveness was to make them wanderers and exiles on the earth. Why should anyone ever repent of anything if they knew they could never go home again? Gregory went straight for the purists’ shriveled hearts – **“Do you not accept repentance?” Come on, stand here on our side, on the side of human beings.”**

These early church fathers, as non-dual thinkers and believers, have zeroed in on something very important here. Where we stand has everything to do with how we hear the parable of the prodigal son. When people who have suffered because of us rise up on one elbow and say to us, with all of Christ’s compassion, **“I am forgiving you for that,”** that is when true repentance begins. That is when we join hands and **come home again, together**.

As we enter our 174th year at our Annual Meeting this day, I pray we all see the Prodigal in our life. Welcome home the Prodigal of us all to be reconciled, redeemed, ambassadors for God and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let us come home, together.

AMEN

P.S. – a few Lighten Up moments for your reading pleasure ...

- **Knock, knock. Who's there? Who! Who who? That's what an owl says!**
- **Knock, knock. Who's there? A broken pencil. A broken pencil who. Oh never mind it's pointless.**
- **Knock, knock. Who's there? Ya. Ya Who? Wow, I'm excited to see you too.**
- **Knock, knock. Who's there? Boo! Boo who? Don't cry, it's just me.**
- **Knock, knock. Who's there? Interrupting pirate! Interrup... ARRRRRRRRRRR!**
- **Will you remember me in 2 minutes? Yes. Knock, knock. Who's there? Hey, you didn't remember me!**
- **Knock, knock. Who's there? Banana. Banana who? Knock, knock. Who's there? Banana. Banana who? Knock, knock. Who's there? Banana. Banana who? Knock, knock. Who's there? Orange. Orange who? Orange you glad I didn't say banana?**