

Lent IV, March 10, 2013  
The Parish of St. Clement, Honolulu  
The Rev. Michael Barham

### Prodigal Pilgrims

By the time I usually get to the end of reading the story often referred to as the Prodigal Son (a bit of a misnomer that is more of a modern contrivance - "prodigal" isn't a word in this passage, and the story is about more than the wayward child), I have forgotten the little detail of context with which the story opens: Jesus hears the "grumblings" of his fellow religious professionals, who find Jesus' openness to the "less-desireables" as some gossip worthy scandal. Jesus' response is, as it so often was, to tell a story. Actually Jesus tells three stories, two of which are omitted from our censored lectionary passage this morning.

You may have noticed that verses 4-11a are missing from our reading. Right after the words "Jesus told them this parable" you can insert two other parables. First Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep (a shepherd has 100 sheep, one strays away from the fold and gets lost, the shepherd leaves the 99 and goes to find the one, and when the sheep is found, a party is thrown for friends and neighbors, and the shepherd is glad – or in the NRSV, the stronger term, rejoices). Then he tells the story of the lost coin (where a woman has ten coins, loses one, searches for and finds the one coin, and then throws a big party for her friends and neighbors; the gospel says she is glad, she rejoices). Now you may be noticing a theme: a party with friends and neighbors and rejoicing!

This is important context: (1st) of the scandal of Jesus ministry that he welcomes anyone who would listen – a crowd of Pharisees (the symbol of hypocrisy in scripture), tax collectors (traitors and robbers), and sinners (those who had chosen a life that rejected God); and (2nd) it is in the repetition in these stories that Jesus reveals a little not only of who God and Jesus are and who we are, but of what Jesus invites us to become part: a kingdom of justice, mercy, compassion, and love, and a ministry of reconciliation of which we are ambassadors.

What does this say about God and who we are?

God seeks us. Though we also can seek after God, Jesus reminds us that God seeks, too. That is to say that somehow God desires us, all of us, not just some of us, and maybe even especially those of us who think we are not worthy, or that we have screwed up too often and too big, or who think we are too lost to be found, or who have even rejected God and God's pursuit of us. God seeks us, and ultimately, God always finds us. In our lives, do we seek God? Do we welcome God's pursuit of us?



Aaron Douglas's *The Prodigal Son*, celebrated in a postage stamp released this week, on Thursday, March 7, 2013.

These stories also tell us that God is not ashamed of us (God celebrates us!), no matter how much the world may be ashamed of us – when we find and are found by God, we are celebrated by a God who is glad because of us – whose heart rejoices in us enough [is proud of us enough] to gather God's friends and neighbors to throw a party (what a wonderful image to ponder – God's friends and neighbors; aren't we called to be God's friends and neighbors?! And it doesn't matter whether we still have the stench of the piggens on us or not, God will run out to us and embrace us. Now, there is a post office I frequent that is also frequented by a particular homeless woman, and I have noticed how people tend to give her a wide berth – there is a big gap in the line after her. Even I have a hard time pushing forward – that's my confession for Lent - but I keep reminding myself that God would run to her and embrace her in God's arms. Can't you imagine how awful the sweaty and stinky prodigal pilgrim would have been? But God celebrated the returning child. Do we recognize that God celebrates our life? How do we celebrate the lives of those we love? How do we celebrate the lives of strangers, do we celebrate them as God would celebrate them?

God gives us freedom. Whether we wander off or stay close at hand, God gives us freedom to live our lives. The exercise of that freedom has consequences – as the prodigal child well knows, and as the older brother had not quite figured out. We have the freedom even to reject God. How do we use our freedom? Do we, in our freedom, chose those things that would imprison us, that would weigh us down in our journey, that cause us to fall?

God welcomes even those who reject God. We are not the sum of our worst selves, we do not have to be defined by the worst of what we may have done, or what we may have failed to do, and we are always welcome to exercise the freedom God has given us to come home. Nothing we do within that freedom – however much suffering we may cause one another and ourselves – indeed nothing at all as the epistles say – can separate us from the love of God, whose ministry, Paul writes to the Corinthians, is one of reconciliation. No matter what our sin, or our mistakes, or our shortcomings, God welcomes us. Do we feel welcome by God? Do we live our lives as witness to this radical, generous, simple, and authentic welcome? How have we experienced this church as a place of welcome? Where have we failed or where are we failing to offer hospitality to God's children? To those who come to hear what Jesus has to say?

What do these stories say about Jesus and who we are?

Jesus is okay with people who are lost and looking for a way back. And so should we be, also. Jesus has a message, and it is as much for those that the religious elites don't think are worthy as it is for the religious elites themselves – and as Jesus points out through the prodigal parable, they, too, can easily become estranged from God's party. Are we really ready to welcome into our companionship people who are different from us, who look or act or think

differently? Where are the comfort level lines we draw? What are the excuses we make for defaulting to homogeneity? In other words, how often, when we are honest with ourselves, might we more easily identify with the hypocrites than the sinners? Is there anybody who might walk into our party that would cause us to step outside and sulk?

Jesus' mission not only includes tax collectors and sinners, but it would seem from the parables that they are the main point of Jesus' ministry: to seek out those who are lost, or as we sometimes say about these parables: the least, the last, and the lost. These stories give us a glimpse of what Jesus was trying to build, a community where those who had been rejected and oppressed were given a chance before God, redefining justice in terms of mercy, compassion, repentance, and reconciliation – actually, not really redefining but illuminating (!) nothing new, but the themes of the prophets throughout scripture. Jesus' work of fishing for people is kind of like pulling up our nets, throwing all the fish back, and working with the tires and old shoes and rusted metal that we dredged up. Are we willing to hang with a disreputable crowd in order to follow Jesus and the reign of God?

What does this passage say of our call to be part of God's ministry of reconciliation?

We hear again in these stories about the work of God that Corinthians calls the ministry of reconciliation, not just our own reconciling - for the message of God is that our lives are part of something greater than our own – but for the reconciliation of the entire world. What that looks like is a reign of justice, mercy, compassion, and love. As it turns out, the season of Lent is very much about reconciliation.

The disciplines of Lent are not so much a burden to carry on our backs, as a means of learning what things we can let go of, or allow to let go of us, to lighten our load. All of the things our spiritual director in residence, Jane Redmont, helped us think about last week – fasting, prayer, meditation, almsgiving, works of mercy, even just breathing deeply and being present in the moment - they are intended to help us listen for and look for God who is rushing out to embrace us, who is searching desperately for us.

Lent is a time when, no matter where we are in our prodigal journey – whether in pigsties, or heading straight towards them, or heading back home, or even standing outside the party with disdain – no matter where we are in our prodigal journey, reconciliation is the promise of our faith, our inheritance as children of God, and the nature of our vocation as those who seek to follow Christ. Let this Lent, then, be a time when we allow ourselves to renew our commitment to listen for and follow the will of God who rejoices at our homecoming.