

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Lent

Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

Los Alamos, New Mexico

The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney

March 27, 2022

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

RECONCILING WITH GOD: FATHER AND MOTHER OF US ALL

Today is Refreshment Sunday, a day when tradition relaxes our Lenten fast – so you can go home and eat chocolate with no guilt.

It is the fourth Sunday in Lent, which is called Laetare Sunday – a Rose Sunday. In England this was Mothers Day, in honor of Mary, the mother of Christ.

So, in honor of Mary and all the mothers present, I want to tell you a secret that most if not all the mothers already know.

Nobody was born “wretched, a sinner from my mother’s womb” as it says in the Great Litany, which we said on the First Sunday of Lent.

As a friend of mine once told me: “there are wretched words, wretched prayers, wretched collects, even wretched music, but no one in this community I care about is wretched.”

There are wretched people in the world. I’ve met at least a couple of them, and been one myself once upon a time.

Sometimes people become wretched, like the story in the Gospel today. But that doesn’t mean we have to stay that way. We just have to turn around and come home to the mother/father who love us.

So it is fitting that this day in England was also “Mothering Sunday.” What’s that mean?

Well, tradition tells us that Mothering Sunday was so named because in the 1600s, children after the age of ten left their homes for jobs as apprentices or domestic servants.

It was considered important by the people that these children be allowed to visit their home and mother church once a year. So, once in a year, in the middle of the Lent the children were given leave by their employers to visit their "Mother Church."

The children would take gifts, flowers and special cakes for their mothers, and the visits became a time for family reunions, and over time, the holiday stretched to include all mothers.

So if we were reading the lessons in England today, the gospel might have been the story of the loaves and fishes that a mother fixed for her son, which he gave to Jesus, who then fed the multitudes.

But we didn't read about the loaves and fishes. We read about the Israelites of the crossing of the Jordan into the promised land.

We read about reconciliation in Corinthians, and that in Christ everything is made new. And we read about the Prodigal Son.

Though there are no women in today's readings, there is a sense of mothering.

Just as the father in the Gospel must let his son go out on his own, God surrenders the care of the people and stops the manna. The Israelites ate the crops of the land of Canaan. I doubt that it was the men who cooked them.

And there is most definitely a feminine aspect to the idea of reconciliation.

My own experience is that mothers are the ones whose arms are always open if a child returns. As Paul writes, God "made him to be sin who knew no sin."

It was Mary who delivered Jesus into this world, who watched him leave on his ministry, and who stood by him at the end and watched him die on the cross. And for a mother or a father to watch a son die. ... Well?

So it does seem fitting that we would read about the Prodigal Son this day.

The story uses male language. We have a lot of that from the Prayer Book to the Hymnal, and someday I hope we can fix it.

After all this story could just as easily have been the story of the Prodigal Child, and instead of father, the character could have been called Parent. The story fits both sons and daughters, fathers and mothers.

At different times in our lives, we identify with different characters in the story. So when I say father, think mother and father, and when I say son, think son and daughter.

It must have been hard for the father in today's story to watch the youngest son leave home. I'm sure that he commiserated with his wife, though her side of the story is not told. She must have agonized over her baby's leaving.

When I was young, right out of high school, I enlisted in the Air Force. I found out later that my mother had thought about objecting. She told me that she was horrified about my going into the service, after all it was the time of Vietnam.

She considered taking my medical history to the enlistment center and arguing that my history of childhood diseases, including polio, disqualified me for service.

But she didn't. She let me go. Just over a year later she realized her worst nightmare. I was sent to Vietnam.

She and my father, my sister and brother, drove me to the point of embarkation in Washington State to wave goodbye one last time.

I can't imagine the feelings that my mother and my father experienced during the drive back to Indiana. They told me years later that it was the most miserable experience of their lives. They truly feared they would never see me again.

But, thank the Lord, I came home. The ordeal was over. In some ways it was as if I had never left. We never talked about it. We put it behind us.

It would be years before I dealt with the stress of the war and reconciled with my country and my God.

Reconciliation is the key to the lessons today. It is redemption and atonement, forgiveness and confession, conciliation and repentance – all rolled up into one giant conundrum.

Reconciliation is not an agreement, an arbitration or a mediation. It's something so much more than we can encapsulate in a single word. It's not so much of a handshake as a really big hug. It is the warm embrace and the face of absolute, unconditional acceptance.

In all my wanderings, no matter what I thought or believed, God was always there for me. Just as I always knew my mother was there for me. I just ignored the reality of God's presence.

Perhaps that's why the story of the Prodigal Son is so compelling for me. We have so many perspectives as we grow up that the character we identify with changes depending on where we are at what stage of our lives.

We have the young son who wants to break free, and ends up wallowing with the pigs. We see him struggling to overcome his own pride to ask that his father take him back, not as a son, but as a slave.

We have the father who must not only let his son go his own way, but must decide to share his worldly goods to enable his son to slide down the steep hill into sin. And the same father welcomes back his contrite son without so much as an “I told you so.”

Then we have the elder son. The dutiful son, the good boy. The man who has worked for his father tirelessly, who now feels neglected and unappreciated.

And we have the loving father again, who recognizes his eldest sons pain, and reassures him of his love.

Such stories as these trace themselves in the parables of Luke to argue that God is the reconciling force in our lives – if only we turn to God to participate in the reconciliation.

We are the Prodigal Son.

In the parable before this one, a woman searches for a lost coin. We are that coin.

In the parable before that one, a shepherd leaves 99 sheep to search for one who has wandered off. We are that sheep.

We continually go astray. All we must do is open our hearts and pray that we be found.

This is the gift of God’s love, and its fulfillment in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Time and time again God goes to extreme lengths to find us and bring us home.

To paraphrase the hymn: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I’m found, was slave but now I’m free.”

That is God’s absolute and total giving over to the desire expressed by Jesus on the cross.

His arms stretched out on the hard wood of the cross to embrace humanity in a divine bear hug that says “welcome my beloved. It’s good to have you home.”

Amen