

Psalm 139:1-12

Luke 15: 1-3; 11b-32

It is hardly possible for us to avoid the cross of Jesus, especially as we approach Holy Week. Yet it is interesting, I think, that our Scriptural texts for these Lenten Sundays show us so much more than simply the Passion and bloody events of Good

because we think we have to fix all the things our younger siblings mess up and break. In any event, this older sibling is a classic: hard working, responsible to a T. Maybe he didn't see his brother return and the amazing encounter on the road. Maybe he did. He does what firstborns do: he keeps on working. But he hears the music and laughter now and it is too much for him. He can't go in and join the celebration and enjoy the party.

And for a second time the father leaves the house and goes out to find a lost child: this elder one lost in his own self-righteousness and pride. "All these years I've been loyal and steadfast and you never gave me a goat." But "this son"—notice the sarcasm, the hurt—"this son" of yours who "wasted your money with prostitutes." Notice it's the older son who brings up the subject of sex. The father ignores his speech as well. "Son, you are always with me; all that I have is yours. But we have to celebrate; your brother was dead and is alive, was lost and has been found."

There is a startling concept of God in this story: a God who comes after the lost, waits patiently watching, but at the first opportunity runs down the road to welcome the lost home again, leaves the party to find and recover the ones who are in self-imposed exile. It's a radical theology, but it is actually not new. It's as old as the Psalter, Israel's hymnbook. Jesus knew the Psalms: memorized them as a child, recited and sang them. He knew those amazing words we heard earlier from Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your spirit?  
If I ascend to heaven you are there;  
If I make my bed in hell, you are there.

Israel knew a God of justice and righteousness, but the Jews also experienced a God of unconditional love who never gives up and never stops pursuing lost children.

So the point I want to make is that the cross, on which Jesus will later die, becomes a symbol of that love that will go anywhere to find us—even there. Words will never encompass all the meaning of Jesus' death. He died for us. His suffering was for us. One idea, to be sure, is that his death is the necessary payment for our sin. It's in the Bible: "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all and with his stripes we are healed."<sup>1</sup> That is profoundly true. But what is equally true is that Jesus shows us a God of love who comes running down the road to welcome us home.

The love comes before we do anything to deserve it or claim it. The young son doesn't get to apologize before he receives his father's forgiveness. Another profoundly radical word: God's love and forgiveness come even before we say we're sorry. That is hard for us. We can get our minds around this notion of forgiveness if there is proper penitence, remorse, penance, or at least a proper apology. But this is different. This is a forgiving love that doesn't wait for an apology but reaches out to the lost. This is a love so profound that it inspires profound repentance: repentance not in order to receive forgiveness, but repentance that comes out of the very depths of the soul because forgiveness has already been given.

And this wonderful story suggests that part of the truth about the human condition is in the very word "lost." The church has thought so much throughout its history about sin: sin as disobedience, original sin, sexual sin, sin as pride, sin as willfulness, "total

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 53:9.

depravity,” our theological ancestors called it. “Jesus came to save us from our sins. Jesus died to forgive our sins, wash away our sins,” we say. But the truth is we have more problems than sin. We get lost. We stray—from our best intentions, our promises, our loves, our commitments. We stray from our own better selves and from God, and we get lost. And the good news is that God doesn’t give up on us but follows us and comes after us and wants to welcome us home.

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest and a popular teacher and writer, wrote several years before he died a wonderful book on the Prodigal Son. Actually, it is a personal meditation on Rembrandt’s masterpiece “The Return of the Prodigal,” which hangs in the Hermitage. In the painting, the son is kneeling in front of his father, an elderly, dignified man. The father’s hands are placed on his son’s shoulders. Nouwen noticed that one hand was masculine, but the tapered fingers on the other hand were decidedly feminine, and concluded, if there were ever any doubt, that the father is really a symbol of God’s love, which is both paternal and maternal and, most important of all, a love that everyone of us desperately needs.

When Nouwen first saw Rembrandt’s masterpiece, it was at the end of a long and arduous journey. Nouwen was tired, exhausted from his demanding schedule of traveling and lecturing, and he wrote about the painting that it “brought me into touch with something within me that lies beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, a sense of safety, a lasting home.”

And then Nouwen became confessional in a way most of us can understand: “the question is not ‘How am I to find God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be found by him?’ Not ‘How am I to know God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be known?’ Not ‘How am I to love God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be loved by God?’ God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, longing to bring me home. . . . Can I accept that I am worth looking for?”<sup>2</sup>

The poet and writer Kathleen Norris is someone else who has helped and inspired me by her eloquence and honesty in wrestling with her own spiritual quests. Norris hadn’t been to church for years and hadn’t thought much about it, and then as a young adult exiled from New York City she started attending her grandparents’ Presbyterian church in Lemmon, South Dakota. Norris remembers, “I came to understand that God hadn’t lost me, even if I seemed for years to have misplaced God.”<sup>3</sup> Older mentors nudged her gently, she remembers, and one said to her, “If you don’t feel as close to God as you used to, who do you suppose moved?”

If you could only know one thing about Jesus other than his death on the cross, this Parable of the Prodigal Son would be the thing to know: the story Jesus told one day about a father and two children and the father’s unconditional love for both of them, the forgiveness that preceded any admission of guilt or promise of reform, the father’s amazing grace that comes down the road, goes out into the field, the amazing grace of

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<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 100-101.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 41-42,

God that comes to wherever we are, whatever road we walk, whatever field we till, and invites us to come home.

And that is also what is going on when Jesus Christ suffers and dies. It is more than the settling of an account, the satisfaction of justice. It is love, the love of God going all this way, all the way into hell itself for us, experiencing the last moment of our mortality because of that unconditional love.

And I like to think that as Jesus died, he remembered, “Whither shall I go from your spirit? If I make my bed in hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your right hand shall hold me fast.”

Have you ever been lost, really lost, and then wonderfully found? It’s a silly little story and it happened a very long time ago, but I do think of it every time I hear this parable. I was not quite seven. We were spending the summer with my grandparents in Kings Park, on the North Shore of Long Island, in the small town where my mother had grown up. My favorite cousins lived across town, not quite a mile away. I had walked the route many times with my mother: you crossed the main street a block up from my grandparents’ house, turn right one block, turn left, follow the sidewalk to the traffic light by the central school, turn left two blocks, turn right up the hill, first left, first right, and there it was: my cousins’ house at the end of the cul-de-sac. One day, when I was impatient to visit and Mother was busy, she gave in to my pestering and—to my great surprise—agreed that my younger brother and I could make the trip alone. Well, we took a wrong turn—turned left instead of right—and became utterly, absolutely lost, so lost I can still remember it. Nothing looked familiar. I was scared, and my little brother was crying and I probably was crying although I don’t remember that part. What I remember was my aunt’s distinctive voice and I remember hearing it call my name and seeing her at the bottom of one of a hill, looking for us, and I remember what that felt like to be found and safe and home.

And I do believe that Jesus reveals a God who comes to each of us like that.

But Jesus didn’t finish the story. The elder brother is still outside when the story concludes. And maybe it’s because he wants you and me to finish the story in our own lives<sup>4</sup>—to allow ourselves to be found and forgiven and loved by him, to walk into the banquet hall and take our seat at the table. God’s child, home and safe—forever.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we bend our knees and lift up our hearts, giving glory to God forever. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Prodigal Father,” *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), 167.