

Lenten Meditations

2010
All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 15, 2010

Waiting

I thought that this would be better somehow. Now that he is finally gone, it has all stopped. The yelling has stopped. The slammed doors have stopped. The accusing stares have stopped. The whispered conversations with his miserable friends have stopped.

My wife no longer tells me that "I need to make him follow our rules while he lives under our roof!"

My other son no longer asks me why I put up with his nonsense.

It has all stopped.

The money was the easy part. I know how to throw money at a problem. If he wanted his share, fine, he could have it. As long as he would just go away. Just leave us alone.

Silence.

I never imagined that silence could be a tangible thing. Draping itself over the furniture. Stirring itself into my meals. Sitting on my chest, making it so hard to breathe.

Silence.

Waiting.

Paul W. Burke

March 16, 2010

Eating and drinking with sinners? Horrors. What was Jesus thinking? Could it be that he was not terribly interested in purity of the kind that sets up boundaries and barriers and separates one person from another? I've been wondering if the basis for unity among Christians is not agreement or 'like-mindedness' but is more our ability to look one another in the eye and hear one another's stories around the Lord's Table. The basis for unity is our transcending not our differences from one another, but the negative consequences of those differences. The basis for unity is not overcoming difference in favor of similarity, but appreciating difference as part of our unity in the magnificent and endless possibilities inherent in creation. What we discover around the Table is that we are eating and drinking with sinners and they discover our sinful or distorted being at the same time. Like the prodigal, we discover the prodigious love of God for all of creation in our difference around that Table. It is as we learn to recognize, understand and even appreciate difference that we become more fully ourselves, more clear about who we have been created to be and more compassionate toward others.

It is as we allow our attention to be turned toward what really matters and toward that which is of ultimate worth that we are participating truly in worship. We properly look for the effects of worship in our lives and not in the worship itself. Frequently we will not be aware of those effects of worship in our lives. At other times we will notice that we are living with a little more compassion for the follies and foibles of others than was the case in the past. Or we will discover that we enjoy being a little more generous and a little less anxious than our internalizing of all the world's messages of scarcity had previously allowed us. Once in a blue moon we might enjoy some experience of the presence of God in our being convicted of sin or called to repentance; in our being aware of forgiveness and granted a powerful sense of common cause with those about us; with our knowing the might and majesty and glory of God in a theophany during some magnificent anthem; or simply being touched at the moment of communion when just for a second or two we know ourselves one with our creator and unaware of time. All such gifts during the worship itself are exactly that—gifts of grace—and not something we can conjure, manipulate, coerce or guarantee.

So we find ourselves being welcomed as sinners and eating with others like us in the company of our gracious host—the one who runs to meet us as we lay bare our hearts before the throne of grace.

The Rev'd Geoffrey Hoare

March 17, 2010

Whenever I read this familiar story, I find myself doing a gut check—do I still need to identify with the "good son" in order to justify old resentments toward my siblings? Fortunately, the answer (most of the time anyway) is no. These days, other questions come up for me, and maybe they are your questions too.

I work in a large, diverse organization, where my colleagues hold a variety of beliefs. There is one religious word, though, that frequently pops up in short, casual exchanges: "blessed." "Have a blessed day." "How are you? I'm blessed." There is a vehicle parked in our garage with a front bumper tag that says "Blessed!" It's a pretty nice car.

I have to wonder. If you are "blessed" does it mean you have received experiences or worldly goods that are generally considered positive? If you experience pain or deprivation, do you still consider yourself "blessed?" I have not, it's true, asked these questions of anyone who uses this word to describe himself, but it's not hard to imagine there's a pretty close connection between being "blessed" and being appropriately rewarded. The "good son" in today's story would certainly think so.

The God that the "good son" believes in would reward him and all others who do the right things, in this world and the next. This is a God who spends the day doling out candy and coals. And if those who have earned candy nevertheless get coals, they should realize it is really candy in a coal wrapper (which we will understand clearly when God chooses to reveal its candyness to us). This is an orderly world—an accountable world.

But it is not the God Jesus reveals to us in this story. The God who sent Jesus to reveal Her nature does not keep track of our good and misdeeds. This God doesn't think about whether the Prodigal Son actually deserves the joyful embrace of his father, but rejoices with the father and son in their reunion.

What Good News! We don't have to wonder if we are good enough—in truth we never can be good enough to earn the wondrous, priceless love of God. We don't have to wonder if grief has come to us because of our own sins—punishment from a vengeful, Old Testament God. No, Jesus shows us a God that never promised us we would not grieve, but only that He would be with us in our grief. His arms are always open, no matter how often we've turned away, and He is with us, sharing grief and joy alike. His love is a freely given gift.

We are blessed, indeed. Thanks be to God.

Susan Hoy

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March 18, 2010

Every time I hear the story of the prodigal son, I am reminded of my parents. On the occasions I would visit them at their retirement cottage on the banks of the Eastatoe River in the Carolina foothills, my mom would have made home made biscuits—the small flakey spheres oozing with fresh butter. My dad's comment would be "the prodigal son returns" indicating that he rarely had this treat except when I graced his door. He by no means felt that I was recklessly extravagant or wasteful. He and I both appreciated Mom's biscuits more than any fatted calf.

I am reminded of the inheritance I received from my parents. They were "green" before it was in vogue. The rich bottom land where the river overflowed was fertile and offered a wonderful place for their garden. What a treat it was to pick an ear of Silver Queen corn, shuck it and drop it in a pot of boiling water and have it with a plate of home-grown Heritage tomatoes and lettuce, half-runner beans that my mom had picked and prepared, and new potatoes. I can still see my dad's knurled hands graveling for these jewels under the wilting potato vines. Restaurant Eugene could have made one visit to their garden for provisions for his Sunday evening meal.

When my dad finished working his garden, he was always eager to catch his limit of trout from the swift stream. Most were from the hatchery, but what a thrill when hooked a native brown or rainbow! Since he had experienced the depression, catch and release was not in his vocabulary. Despite this he had a great respect for the land and for maintaining it for those who came after.

My parents were teachers and didn't have any reservations about sacrificing to insure that my brother and sister and I took advantage of our educational system. They had great love and generosity for their family and friends and those less fortunate.

Although they were known in the community where they settled, the mountain neighbors were slow to accept them. My parents took their produce with them and eventually supported the community church monetarily and with attendance even though it was not of their chosen denomination. The mountain neighbors gradually accepted them. It reminds me somewhat of new folks coming to All Saints'. When they become involved, they become part of the community. There are many service opportunities here to be of service without being overwhelmed. When we came to All Saints', Bill Baxter asked us to join the Sunday school teachers group. I still look on those folks as some of my dearest and closest friends here.

Not only do we inherit good and simple things from our parents, but we are also blessed with wonderful examples from our spiritual leaders. I am even grateful to Frank Ross who in an era of dynamic social unrest led by example and gave us a quiet reassuring message that change would come and not to be afraid.

I am thankful that Harry Pritchett led us to help the homeless with the night shelter which eventually led to the Covenant Community; that he was steadfast and courageous in his love and caring for our brothers and sisters who were affected by the AIDS epidemic that was raging and is still with us; and for reminding us that we are all children of God. I am appreciative of Geoffrey's strengthening of our local missions with Threads and refugee resettlement and giving us an opportunity of a broader view with work in Tanzania and Brazil.

I am thankful that there is All Saints', "a sweet place" as Frank used to say, "full of sweet people." I am grateful for the material things found on the corner of North Avenue and West Peachtree, but even more for the people and the simple blessings we have inherited—from Margaret Langford's garden to the work the men of the Covenant Community perform.

Art Lesesne

March 19, 2010

When reading Luke 15, my first thought is that of a parent. As a mother of two young daughters, I try to imagine what I would do as the parent in this parable. It's hard to imagine not welcoming a long lost child, no matter the reason, no matter the length of absence. Isn't that what being a parent is all about: unconditional love? We try our best to teach our children about values, hard work, and showing respect but, ultimately, they grow to make their own decisions, not of all which will be good ones. Even with preschoolers we tell our children "We love you, no matter what."

I'm sure the parent in this parable feels similar, even though the son has been gone and, as my daughter would say, "not making good decisions." The father greets him warmly, even before the son has a chance to apologize when he says "I have sinned against you."

The brother's anger at this reception is almost predictable. As an only child who became a mother of two, I'm constantly amazed at their ability to compare—even from an early age! What one has, the other must have, too. It seems they're born with an incredible capacity to remember the smallest detail of discrepancy. If someone gets something the other doesn't, you can count on "It's not fair!" as the response. (To which we usually reply, "The fair was in August!") Siblings seem to expect everything to be equal and this brother is no different. Here he has been a loyal, diligent, considerate son, yet his brother receives a hero's welcome after slacking off for who knows how long.

Beyond parenting, this makes me wonder if we don't make this mistake at work too. In business, we seem to fawn all over the clients who make the biggest noise. Those who make life difficult, complain and overreact get the most attention, while the quiet ones don't seem to get noticed quite as much. Not to say that they're not appreciated but we all know the ones that strike a true sense of urgency when they call. Our current roster of clients includes many smart, strategic, sound thinkers yet a few of the others' names send people running for cover! Shouldn't it be that the cooperative, calm, confident client gets more attention than the squeaky wheel? Logically, this makes sense but in reality it doesn't seem to work that way.

Many parents I know describe similar climates at home. That one child who always misbehaves, the one who requires so much more oversight, gets all the attention. Meanwhile the child who follows the rules, uses their manners and does what is expected gets far less attention in the same home. I'm sure I've been guilty of this from time to time myself! I think it's time to try and switch this logic in our lives. Let's remember to truly appreciate all that we have and not spend too much time on the negative. Embrace the positive and focus on the good we see in all people.

Donna Mitchell

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All Saints' Episcopal Church

March 20, 2010

The parable of the Prodigal Son is difficult for me because I don't have any problem being the good kid. I like to push the envelope from time to time, to test the boundaries of the rules, but all in all, I don't mind doing the right thing.

To be fair, I am not a rule-follower in order to get accolades, to rack up the gold stars or to prove my own piousness. I just find the world easier to manage when things are a bit more orderly, when I show people the respect that I'd like to be shown. I like being known as trustworthy and capable and solid. In some circles, this reputation also makes me a party pooper and a stick-in-the-mud, teacher's pet and just plain boring.

I know that not everyone is like me. I love the diversity in the world, really I do. But I also have deep sympathy for the stay-behind-son, the good guy, the trustworthy, capable, solid one—the boring one. He hung around at his parents' house, working the land, doing what was expected of him. I like that about him. I, too, would have been angry and frustrated to find out that my years of obedience and rule-following were unnoticed in comparison with the flashy re-entry of the wayward one.

My hackles go up just reading this story. It is just not fair. He should get his come-uppance! To the pig sties with him! Where is the justice?!

But this is not, of course, how God works in the world. There is justice. But the justice is available to everyone alike, just as God's mercy is.

This story smacks me hard every time with my own prejudices and blind spots. I believe in and preach about a God whose vast loving arms surround us all in a blind embrace. But when I read the story of the Left-Behind Brother (as I see it), I get angry and frustrated. I forget the wideness that is God's mercy. I forget that the infinity of God's love refuses to account for misdeeds or bad behavior.

I am beloved, but not for my good deeds, not because I follow the rules or say the right prayers. I am beloved simply because I exist, a child of a loving God, and I am beloved even when I am angry and judgmental and wrong: because God is that good.

Noelle York-Simmons