

HOPE FOR RENEWAL

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Today's readings really dovetail into a lot of things I have been mulling over these last few weeks of Lent. A time of penitence and hope for renewal.

I feel blessed to be able to spend some time and share with you a few thoughts about these well-known readings.

In Joshua, we find the Israelites are finally out of the desert, eating from the bounty they harvested in the Promised Land. They have survived the ordeals of their 40-year journey, having moved past their frustration in the face of ill-formed expectations. They no longer had to eat the manna from heaven that they had grown to resent. They were afraid, they doubted, they questioned the Lord by rejecting his chosen messenger and shepherd Moses. They were angry, frustrated, and impatient. So much so that they cast an idol as an offering, a reflection of their version of God; one they invented, in the absence of Moses who had stepped away to seek counsel on the mountain top. They judged Moses as incompetent, accused him of trying to kill them. They mock him: "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you brought us out here to die in the desert?" The hilarious thing here is, Moses comes down the mountain carrying the Ten Commandments, the foundational list of "how to behave," the quintessential guide to living a better, easier life in community with others.

How human. How perfectly imperfectly human. How like us to doubt. And how reflective of our tendency to act in the face of uncertainty. We try to control the narrative, try to guess what is expected of us (in this case casting a golden calf as an offering), and assuming we will not get what was promised. And despite the doubt of those ancient people, God prevailed and they made it. He brought them through. They looked for an easier road, convinced they knew better what God wanted of them, grumbled, distrusted, and judged. And made a lot of mistakes.

Moses knew he would never get to see their deliverance, yet he never wavered. His people moved forward into a new life as a free people in relationship to their savior God, whom they questioned repeatedly. Why? In my view, we doubt God because we are human. So, God sent them the roadmap. We still are trying to follow it, three and a half millennia later.

In Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, a similar theme emerges. Like the Israelites moving into Canaan and into a new life, Paul describes that in being reconciled to Christ we become a "new creation" and that in this discovery of God's love and acceptance, the old things have passed away. The Old Way is thinking about God as an angry presence, threatening damnation at every turn as in the Old Testament, of which Paul was a scholar. That narrative frequently depicts God's will as a zero-sum game. Somebody wins, somebody loses. In the end, nobody advances. Paul, in his understanding of Christ and his mission, presents us with a new story; that Christ was sent to us in human form, capable of error, yet well beloved. The Son whom God entrusted to teach us that we are forgiven for our trespasses, both those against ourselves and those against others. This ministry, that we are now Ambassadors of Christ, *assumes* our failings, the ones built into our very humanness. Paul tells us in sharing this message of reconciliation to God, we recognize God's presence in others. He isn't counting our errors, nor should we count and judge the mistakes of others.

And yet we do.

Throughout all of the New Testament, we repeatedly see the ways Christ *literally* tells us what to do to open ourselves to the Love that God has for all of us. Jesus asks us to move through the world expressing forgiveness and kindness and to extend the grace to others that is *extended to us* in the light of God's love. That love is present and available to *all of us* despite our manifold faults and missteps, and we are asked to recognize ourselves in each other and to see the face of God in all of our fellow travelers. Once we have figured out what we're here to do, "Everything old will have passed away."

In the Gospel reading from Luke, we are once again confronted with the familiar tale of the prodigal son. Or, as I like to call it, the Parable of "Dad Always Liked You Best!" The message here is so time-worn and obvious that I am loathe to rehash it as we all know it and can easily feel the puzzlement of *both* the sons in how this narrative unfolds.

Here are the highlights: The younger brother is a dope. A young, arrogant dope who foolishly thought he could make his way in the world, flaunting the natural order of things and getting his inheritance upfront. So certain is he that he can make his way out of the shadow of his father and older brother that he blows through everything in short order. Fast forward the tape, he predictably ends up in dire straits, feeding pigs and wishing he could eat their leftovers. He has failed hard and yet bravely risks rejection in his long walk back to his father's land. Hoping to get a job as a laborer, any job in order to earn a meal. Nowhere in this is he imagining what happens next. Deep in disgrace and shame, he is returning to the father as a penitent, fully aware of just how spectacularly he messed up. He was a fool as only young impetuous people can be. Only human...a child of God.

For me, however, the interesting thing is the reaction of the older brother. The one who has "done everything right," who has followed the rules and never got so much as a goat to serve at a party with his friends. (Personally, I would have asked for a bottle of wine and some good cheese, but whatever.) He is enraged at this outsized reception. He is indignant that this could happen after all the despicable things the younger one has done with his share. He has no inkling of the shame and self-loathing his brother feels. How little he actually expected and how ready and willing he was to abase himself in the eyes of the father he knows he has wronged by wasting his gifts. The brother knows none of this and jumps straight to judging. He cries, "No fair!"

He is us. Don't we all try to follow the rules, to walk a path of righteousness, always *assessing our position* in relation to others? We deem who is deserving of things, who is not. We assume we know the story. We do not. Again, human nature.

On my left is a spectacular work of art depicting this most human of stories, the stained-glass window of the Prodigal Son. So universal is this theme that it stands at pride of place, majestic and beautiful, and it never fails to move me no matter how many times I look at it. It is so fitting to see it in our church home.

This beautiful window tells us that we are *always* welcome. That despite of our feelings of unworthiness, our guilt, our shame--and despite the judgement of others who would keep us forever in our errors and who would define us by our biggest mistakes--there is always a place for us at our Father's table.

Whenever we read the Gospels or the letters from Paul or the stories in Acts, we are reminded of the *consistency* of human behavior. The Apostles repeatedly misunderstood what Jesus was saying. They had different ideas about what their movement was about and worried about their place in the pecking order of Jesus' favor. They still squabbled over it after Jesus was gone. How many parables did Christ share in his short ministry on Earth? How many times did Jesus ask something of them and they failed? Peter in particular. He falls asleep, he denies knowing Jesus to save his own skin! Yet Jesus never wavers in his love of them all. Not only does he forgive them, he repeats himself constantly in the hopes he can get through to them before his time with them was up. Sound familiar?

Some of Jesus' parables make it to different Gospels--each with a slightly different tone, a slight change in narrative detail. They still retain the initial intent, but it is telling that each of the "authors" heard and reported something slightly different. I've often said that the Apostles are proxies for us. They struggle to understand, struggle to do the right thing in the face of challenging circumstances, just like we do. We fail to "get it" and still we are loved.

There is no "favorite Apostle" any more than there is a "favorite" *anybody*. That's a human construct, as so much of society and organized religious traditions are based on a patriarchal family model.

It exceeds our imagination that there is not "One Single Way." If only there were one universal plan of action to get us into God's grace. A plan revealed only to "super special virtuous people". And we all fervently hope to be in *that* club. So, we compare, we judge, we assume, and we dismiss. We do these things because deep down we feel we are unworthy and, if someone is behaving worse (in our eyes at least), well then, we've got a fighting chance. By that we completely miss the point. There *is* a plan, and it's for *everyone*.

What we fail to grasp is this fundamental truth: God made us *as we are*. He loves us *where we are* and *for who we are*. It is up to us to do the same for others. We love ourselves, respecting that God is in us *as he is in every living being*, and that we are all entitled to that same redemption, no matter where we are in our journey. We are all just trying to make our way back to the house. By taking that long walk home from the pigsty, or by struggling across the desert for 40 years in confusion and fear. *That* is the "plan."

But we slip up. Often. Making judgements of others without accounting for the full story, not understanding the misery of the “other,” equating *circumstance* with *character*, *foolishness* with *unworthiness*, guilt and shame as the only measure of our self-worth.

It is important to recognize the beauty and variety of the human condition. Yet it can be hard for us to find compassion for others when judgement is clouded by our sense of “fairness.” We try to follow the rules, to do the right thing always. By focusing on “right things,” we lose sight of our own fallibility. We are harshest toward others when we feel our own unworthiness most acutely. We find fault in others in a simple calculus to position ourselves better in the moral Olympics. As a result, we become brittle. Inflexible. Un-Christian.

This past weekend, Mark and I were at a family wedding. It was an absolutely lovely day filled with such joy and renewal that I found myself tearing up. At the reception, we sat with Mark’s brother John and his wife Annie, lamenting the fact that much of Christianity has been co-opted and politicized in a way that has rendered it all but unrecognizable. They have been steady church-goers, members of largely rural evangelical denomination that buoyed their desire to do the work Christ asked us to do. In a deeply brave and loving move, some years ago John and Annie adopted three siblings from a very troubled family, expanding their family to seven. They struggled over the years with the challenges of blending a family with kids who needed *so much* from *all* of them. They worried they had made mistakes, and that they were not “enough” for all of their kids. Their church was a source of support and refuge.

Recently, they became alarmed with the rhetoric at their church, which had become more strident in denying the humanity and worthiness of people who do not conform to this new, very narrow, *very political* interpretation of Christian belief. John asked us, “What ever happened to human decency? Kindness?” And, oddly, at the same time, we four tried to remember the order of the quote from Micah 6:8. After a few middle-aged memory fails and *many* laughs, we consulted “the Googles” and found it: “God desires us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”

I would add that we should emphasize the humble part and withhold judgement. Let’s allow ourselves and others to lapse and find redemption. Better yet, lets help *each other* find our way back to the house.

As Samuel Beckett said, in his often bewildering novella *Worstward Ho*, (by the way that is a *great* title!)

“...Ever tried. Ever failed. No Matter. Try again. Fail. Fail Better.”

Sounds like a plan.

Amen.