

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
*Preached by Sister Adele Marie Ryan, SSM on March 31, 2019 (Lent 4, Year C)*

A friend of ours belongs to a laughter yoga group. When I asked about her experience she explained how laughter contributes to overall health, physically as well as spiritually. If, as it has been said, laughter is the sound of joy, there's an obvious connection with the theme of this Sunday, which is joy. Today is Laetare Sunday, laetare being the first word of the old Latin Mass Introit "Rejoice, O Jerusalem." The psalm for today strikes same note: "Be glad, and rejoice in the Lord, - shout for joy."<sup>i</sup> It's an invitation to experience the joy of a renewed relationship with God.

Today is the mid-point of Lent; yes, it's half over (which for some is in itself is a cause to rejoice). Another name for this day is Refreshment Sunday, (which also can be taken as an invitation to lighten up). In some churches there is a change from somber purple vestments to those of a lighter hue: hence the name Rose Sunday. The first time I saw Rose colored vestments was when I was in the novitiate. On the Fourth Sunday in Lent we went to the 11 a.m. Solemn High Mass at the Church of the Advent in Boston. As the clergy entered I looked up from my hymnal and saw three guys in pink (and in those days it was always "guys"), and, I must admit, I had to stifle a laugh.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent is a turning point in our Lenten journey. Palm Sunday and Holy Week are just two weeks away. The focus shifts from our inward acts of discipline and devotion to outward focus on the saving work of Christ on the cross. From this hill in Hingham we look to the hill of Calvary, and we prepare with joy for the Paschal feast.

The Gospel reading is from the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel – a chapter we might call "Luke's Lost and Found Department." This chapter contains three parables about losing and finding. The verses omitted from today's gospel are two very short parables. The first tells of a lost sheep and a searching shepherd. The second is about the loss of a precious coin and a woman who turns her house upside down until she finds it. In both stories when the lost is found there is much rejoicing. And, Luke concludes, such is the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

The third parable is easily the most famous of all the parables Jesus told. As soon as we hear the words "There was a man who had two sons ..." most of us recognize it as the story that has long been called the parable of the Prodigal Son. Tradition provides this title but it's interesting to note that nowhere does Jesus mention the phrase, because the story is not about the wayward son, but about his father.

Such a familiar story can be difficult to hear in any new and meaningful way. It calls to mind a signboard in front of an Antique Store in Plymouth, which read: "nothing new here."

How might we discover newness in this old, familiar story? One answer comes from the creative mind and heart of the preacher and writer Frederick Buechner. He suggests that "all the parables of Jesus can be read as jokes about God in the sense that what they are about is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people."<sup>ii</sup> For Buechner the story of Jesus is filled with the tragedy of human failure, the comedy of being loved overwhelmingly by God despite that failure, and the fairy tale of transformation through that divine love.

Once upon a time there was a landowner with two sons. One day the younger son goes to his father and demands to receive his inheritance immediately, so that he can get away from home, do his own thing. The father consents. So the young man goes off, and eventually squanders every penny in dissolute living, and is forever labelled the prodigal son. Hollywood loves such reprobates so of course it's not surprising that his story gets all the attention.

The other son, the elder brother, stays at home. He doesn't appear lost at all; but he is as lost as the Pharisees and scribes for whom Jesus told this parable. This is hard to believe because he is dutiful, trustworthy, and responsible. Our sympathies may lie with him. But when we get to the end of the story we discover that he too has wandered far off.

As the story reaches its climax the welcome home party is in full swing with music, dancing, and feasting. Everyone on the farm is having a great time – except for the older son. Where is he? Standing in the dark outside the house, alone, sulking; warming himself at the fires of his own resentment.

Two lost sons. One is vain, selfish, and intemperate. He comes home only when he has no other option. The other brother is self-righteous, smug and grudging. One commentator says we should pity the father who has to live with these two brats, and suggests that it is the father who should have run away, and left the farm for the two kids to fight it out.<sup>iii</sup> But that's not the story Jesus told.

The story is about a loving father, a searching, seeking parent. The father reaches out to both of his wayward offspring. Day after day, waiting, looking down the road for the younger son. Then comes the moment when he sees him, and races toward him and embraces him in a huge bear hug.

Later, at the welcome home party, the father notices the absence of the elder son. Leaving the party he goes out into the darkness to the elder brother, telling him how much he is loved, assuring him that everything I have is yours. Both children are loved, welcomed, cherished unconditionally.

Who is the real prodigal in this parable? It is the father, who pours lavish, extravagant and abundant mercy on each son. Whose love is beyond calculation of right and wrong, does not wait for the recital of sin, but offers forgiveness first. And it is confidence in such a tremendous love that brings the wayward home.

To be sure, this parable speaks to the destitute and despairing and to those who proudly claim, "I never disobeyed your commands." But it also has a powerful message for all of us who find ourselves somewhere between the extremes.

What happens the day after the party? The story is unfinished, for its resolution must take place in our own lives.

Whether you have wasted opportunity after opportunity, or labored devotedly but perhaps resentfully, God loves you. Whether your trust in God is lifelong, faltering, fainting, or just beginning, God's desire is to be in relationship with you for God is madly in love with humankind. And love like this is so foolish that it goes all the way to the cross to show how far our prodigal God will go to tell us of how immensely we are loved.

Love like this doesn't die, it endures suffering to the point of death. Love like this never ends, it is raised into new life, everlasting life where the heavens ring with laughter at the homecoming of all the beloved children of God.

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<sup>i</sup> Psalm 32:12, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 625

<sup>ii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*

<sup>iii</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 237