

St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday 31 March Lent 4 Feeling Lost?

Readings for the Gathering

Gospel Luke 15:1-3 and 11-32

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable:

The Parable of the Lost Son

¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹ "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Contemporary reading:

'Lost Blessing' by Jan Richardson from *The Painted Prayerbook*

<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/07/13/lost-blessing/>

In a favourite scene from *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, as the crew sails beyond the known world on a quest to rescue Captain Jack Sparrow, Will Turner asks Captain Barbossa for a heading. With a keen eye born of long experience on the sea, Barbossa replies, "Aye, we're good and lost now." "Lost?" Elizabeth Swann asks, clearly unsettled by the relish with which Barbossa has delivered his navigational assessment.

"For sure," Barbossa assures her, "you have to be lost to find a place that can't be found, elseways everyone would know where it was."

It's one of those frustrating truths of the journey: that sometimes the only sure way to find the place we belong is to let ourselves become good and lost—to allow ourselves to be unsure of the next step, to give up looking for markers and directions, and to wait until a path begins to show itself.

Reflection for the Gathering

For me the story of the Lost Son – or the Prodigal Son or the Prodigal Father whichever way you like to think of it- is a fractal of the whole Gospel. A fractal is a small piece or fragment which contains in it everything of the whole.

I often also think of this story as the kernel within the shell of the walnut – the heart of the nut, full of flavour and goodness and nourishment, its full truth hidden inside.

We are used to the dominant motif of the Christian Gospel traditionally being an overemphasis on sin and the subsequent distance between holy God and sinful mortal humankind. I have often heard this story characterise the son's leaving home as a sin and making an especially sinful aspect to be his wasting of the money – sounds like something of a capitalist agenda creeping in there!

But there are other ways to characterise the relationship between the divine and human and how they can be brought together. One is the motif underlying this story – the motif of exile and return. Hold that thought – exile and return.

Life down on the farm is fine; regular, commonplace, like many a family farm. The patriarch rules the fields and the matriarch the house. The two boys in the family have morphed into workers in the family business as they approach manhood. They may well have had sisters, who at that time wouldn't have been important enough in that society to mention. Anyway, even if this family had five sons, we only need two to make the point about the contrasting ways in which we relate to the head of the household of faith.

The two children work alongside the CEO of the business fine enough until one day, the youngest worker's restlessness is too much. An intervention is made, demands put forth, work is suspended as conditions are laid down.

They are shocking conditions. For this younger child is demanding their share of the inheritance now, well before the Father's expected death. In a sense the younger child is saying "I wish you were dead!" to this esteemed parent. It is rude, confronting, insolent and unconventional.

The first surprising twist of the story is that the father says 'yes' to this unreasonable and unprecedented request. Maybe he knows the proverb by an unknown philosopher: "If you love something, let it go. If it comes back to you, it's yours forever. If it doesn't, then it was never meant to be."

Later we will find out the opinion of the firstborn of the family, but for now, the younger one leaves, money bag tied at his waist, off to see the world which of course will be so much better in every way than home could ever be! (What's that fridge magnet – "teenagers leave home now while you know everything!")

Think for a moment about the crowd listening to Jesus' story – they may have known a family where this happened. They would know that probably the family farm was in fact a subsistence landholding. When half of the inheritance had been paid out this early, the family may have had to raise a crippling mortgage. Or perhaps they had to sell, and were now only tenant farmers to one of the absentee landlords about whom Jesus tells many stories. Certainly, to continue to feed and clothe the family, the father and the remaining workers would have had to work very, very hard. This is where they might well wish it was a 5-child family! All hands would need to be on deck.

But that's not the younger child's reality. It's exciting to travel the world when you have money! When it runs out, it is quite a different matter. I remember being stuck in San Francisco for only 10 days, not destitute but with less money than I thought I would have. I rang two contacts and arranged to stay with them, so I was safe and sheltered. I would have enjoyed that had I not *had* to stay with them. But, *knowing* I was dependent on their generosity took the shine out of those ten days.

In Jesus' story, the child on its great OE finally realises they are lost. Jan Richardson has written a blessing based on this story called the lost blessing. It starts off like this:

Lost Blessing

It doesn't always
mean to go astray.
But somehow
this blessing knew
it would find you here—

here in this place
where even you
don't know where
you are.

This blessing
regrets to say

This might have been how the child felt. Lost, all supports which had previously worked were now useless, broken, not able to be accessed. Even the jobs available now were at the bottom of the pile... for a Jew to look after pigs.... Jesus' crowd would have sucked in their breath – this was one of the most degrading jobs for a good Jewish child, feeding and cleaning out sties for an ritually unclean animal such as a pig was the pits. It would mean he could not have contact with respectable people nor could he go to the synagogue even if he were inclined to do so. The pigsty job is a symbol of being at rock bottom and isolated from one's community.

Jan's Richardson's 'lost blessing' continues:

But—
and I know
this might not be
encouraging—
[this blessing] it purely loves
getting lost.

This blessing
has learned to breathe
when it has left
every landmark behind,
when it has seen
its last signpost,
when dark has
begun to fall
while it is
still far from home.

it left its compass
at home.

It is without map,
chart, GPS.
It has hardly
any native sense
of direction.

This blessing
appears to be
nearly useless,
in fact.

This blessing
knows the prayers to say
when it has misplaced
its way,
the chants
that will help it
find the path
where it seems
no path could ever be.

This blessing
is good at finding
fellow travellers.

It loves the company
of the lost,
the wandering,
the confused,
the ones who have been

walking in circles
for days;

loves helping them
find water, shelter,
shade;

loves keeping vigil
so they can
safely rest.

Ironically, in the very place which was bottom of the heap for this young human being, there is time to breathe and think, time to find one's inner self, perhaps for the first time. Time to come to find their commonsense and see the whole picture.

And somehow, without yet going home, this traveller, this lost one, knows that they are not on their own. The blessing continues....

The point of this blessing
is that it has
no real point.

It just wants you to know
you are not alone,
have never been,
will never be—

that it will go with you,
will wander with you
as long as you want,
as long as it takes,
gladly being lost with you
until your way
appears.

—Jan Richardson

So, is the leaving of home, (even after having made importunate demands of home beyond what is usual and proportional), is the leaving of home 'sin' or is it simply a necessary part of the development of ourselves as a human beings? And as we thrash around trying to find ourselves, is it sin to have wandered a long way from home? Or to have squandered our resources in the process?

I think what fits better here is the guilt inducing concept of sin and punishment, but the image of exile. At different times of our lives, in various circumstances, tragedy or simply getting busy with living, we move away from home. Perhaps we have been taken from home or enticed away from home.

We venture out on a voyage of discovery as part of our life's passage but then suddenly or slowly, somewhere, somehow we realise in a moment of despair and loneliness that we are lost. That the old signposts are no longer there, or they no longer work for us.

And we have to stop still, because there does not seem to be any place to go just at that moment. There seems to be no real point. Whether we exiled ourselves or whether outer circumstance did the job for us doesn't matter at this point, we simply find ourselves well away from any familiar landscape without any knowledge or hunch about where to turn next.

So there is plenty of time to breathe deeply,
to go deep inside,
to find what maybe was the thing we were trying to evade all along
to catch a glimpse of our very own Self.

This young'un does just that
and decides that what is the most desirable thing to do is to return home,
not this time as a bored restless adolescent
but this time as a self aware young adult who has learned
to take responsibility for their own development
who has now a little more consciousness

than the blinding unconsciousness of before the leaving of home.
 So this newly reborn young adult sets off,
 rehearsing the speech writing itself in their head.
 Penitent for hurts inflicted, seeking reconciliation and acceptance,
 this time not demanding rights,
 rather taking responsibility
 a sure sign the adolescent has matured to adulthood.

The exile is coming home.
 What will home think of that?

You may have been told that eastern fathers never ran. They were too important a personality in the family and village to ever run
 You may also know that an eastern patriarch would never go to someone younger or inferior, but always expect the younger one to come to them.
 So again, the listeners in Jesus' crowd would have gasped to hear that this Patriarch, having looked out for his loved child each day
 now runs towards the returning exile.

But they would have known something else which we westerners might not. They knew that when a young'un left home in such a divisive way,
 they were regarded by the *whole village* as prodigals.

Not only the family or parent were insulted, the whole village was affected and when they returned as they sometimes did,
 they could encounter stiff opposition and hostility
 from the *whole* settlement,
 curses, venom spat at them, catcalls
 even stones could be thrown
 as they made their way through the village streets to the gate to home.

In a less intense way this can still be the experience of a young person today
 who takes a path not expected by others as they seek to find themselves.
 Anyone in Southland who sells the family farm to take up work in a city
 may find themselves not well understood by the rural community
 and vice versa.

Part of the entrepreneurial struggle is the taking on of something
 others have not thought of or think is impossible.
 So the watching parent here runs to catch up with this child
 before the village can.
 If the waiting parent can get there first, and kiss the young, dusty cheek,
 the village will back off.
 So the young returnee is kissed,
 a robe is called for and the family ring
 all signs of acceptance and welcome and family status restored
 and the waiting watching village is bidden to the feast.

So resurrection is announced,
 for the immature, impetuous devil-may-care youngster has gone
 and we have a new person,
 reborn from the mud of the pigsty of exile.

We then see what happens when we *refuse* the exile experience of growing up. It's a little unfair to blame the older youngster of the family, after all someone had to stay home and do the work – the youngest one's development took a lot of sacrifice from all the family.

But this older one commits the same kind of mistakes.

Refusing to come in to the party means the role of the first born as host for the family is repudiated, an insult to the patriarch

Staying out in the field forces the parent to come out – an implicit negation of the parent's status.

This child too in their turn is 'dissing' the family system.

Those long hours in the fields each day have not been used
to find the true Self within the firstborn's heart
but in regurgitating resentment and bitterness
at the hand life has dealt.

So the true Self is not found,
And the first born becomes lonely and isolated.
Not having lived into the blessing of being lost,
this child will not experience
yet anyway
the welcome which could be found at the gate to home.
But, in the words of the lost blessing
if even this hard heart choses to soften
it will find it is not alone,
"has never been, never will be"

It is not only a story about adolescent development
Remember my description of this story
as the kernel of the Gospel
May those who have ears to hear, understand the message in this Gospel today.

As we walk the spiritual journey we all need to take,
we are not alone have "never been, never will be"
And wherever and however we may have been exiled,
there is always a welcome at the gate to home.

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