

Lent 4 C 2016

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

From lost to found.
From death to life.
From disgrace to homecoming.
From alienation to reconciliation.
From starvation to abundance.

The gospel story we hear today
Is the ideal way to understand
One of the great mysteries of our faith.
What does it mean
To say we are saved?

The word “salvation”
Is sometimes hard to wrap our minds around.
Once we dismiss – perhaps too quickly –
the ways it’s used
In other branches of our tradition,
It’s hard for us to say in positive terms
What we mean
When we say salvation.

So hard, in fact, that I think we may avoid it.
Wondering about myself,
I looked back through my sermon files,
And as far as I can tell,
I have used the word salvation
In a sermon ten times
In the past twenty years.

Not counting the three times just now.

We do, I began to realize,
Talk about salvation a lot more in the undercroft,

Where, in the context of adult faith formation,
We can wrap our heads around it
From a safe distance,
And then see if our hearts are able to follow.

And so,
Last Thursday evening,
As part of our current series
In Exploring Life and Faith,
A group of us considered, first,
our negative associations with the word,
and then,
Our own personal meanings,
And the moments when we have experienced
The truth of salvation.

The loosening of a knot.
The beginning of the journey of recovery.
The long slow process of reconciliation.
Finding our way out of a maze.

That conversation brought me back,
As so often,
To the gospel story we heard today,
The story of the man with two sons,
And to my certainty that this beautiful story,
Which never gets old in the telling,
Shows us everything we need to know
About salvation.
This is what salvation means:
No matter what,
We are wanted, and welcome,
And forgiven.
No matter what we have done,
No matter what has happened to us,
We are cause for celebration.

We arrive in rags and tatters,
And are enrobed in acceptance.

We arrive with our heads hanging in shame,
No longer ourselves,
And receive again our names
And our place at the table.
This is the good news.
If you have this story in your heart,
And believe that it is yours,
Then you have everything you need.
And nothing can take that away.

And yet,
And yet,
This year, this moment in our nation's life,
I wonder:
What does this story offer us,
As a people,
In our time of need?

We so often see this story as personal.
It shows us what it means to be a beloved child of God.
This story is a priceless treasure
For those in the household of the Christian faith.

How do we share our treasure
With a world in need?

If this story is the good news,
How could it transform
A dangerous and disheartening time?

How could it offer a security
That comes,
Not from guns,
Or walls,
But from the sure and certain knowledge
That we are loved?

How could it free us from fear:
Fear of the other,
Fear of change,

Fear of losing control,
Or of losing privilege?

Fear has let loose a beast among us.
A beast that is not a person,
However much we may want to demonize
Our own least favorite candidate –
Whichever one that might be.
A beast that is not a group of people,
However much we may want to blame and shame
Those who flock to rallies we would never go near.

No –
This beast is a collective volcano
Of anxiety, and hatred, and anger.
Things are being said
That have no place in public discourse.
Unthinkable futures seem possible.
It is a bleak and terrifying prospect.

This is a time
For people of faith
To offer our treasure to the world.

How?

The only way I know to start
Is with the story.

So look with me, again,
At the story given to us today.
See it, this time,
As a story for our time:
A story
About money,
And position,
And power.
A story of need,
And resentment,
And abundance.

The father in this story
Knows that there is always enough,
And to spare.
He has great wealth,
Which he holds lightly.
It is less dear to him than his children,
And so, when asked,
He divides his property between them,
Leaving himself – we forget this part –
with nothing.
He lets go of everything that could make him matter,
And yet, his essential self remains.

His position comes not from privilege,
But from wisdom,
And compassion.
His power comes not from wealth,
But from his willingness to understand,
And to forgive.

The way the father lives
Is anathema to those among us
Who cry out for security through violence.
Those who want to shame and exclude
Whole groups of people
So that they themselves can still belong.
Who want to build walls
And tear down mosques
In order to know that their own foundations are still firm.

How can the father live as if there were plenty,
When he had given everything away?
As if he had lost nothing,
When his son disgraced him?
As if celebration were the basic stance of life,
When punishment was so deserved?

The father makes no sense,
If you live in a world of limits and order.

The elder son, in his resentment
And wounded pride,
Is much more familiar to many among us.
He feels slighted –
And don't forget,
His claims have some merit.
The everything he has seems like nothing,
And he can only feel worthwhile
If his brother is worthless.

The forgiving father
Makes nonsense of the son's ordered, limited world.

Then there is the younger son,
The one with whom we more often identify
When we see this as a story
About our personal life with God.
But if we see this, for a time,
As a story about how we live together in community,
A story about money and position and power,
Then the younger son
is a squanderer.
He lives with limits only because he wastes
What should be shared.
He loses everything because he tries to spend it on himself.

Three ways of being:
A son who is a libertine and a wastrel,
A son who is a joyless authoritarian,
And the father –
The father is profligate, irrational,
Heedless and a fool for love.
He will give away everything
In order to bring everyone
To the welcome table,
Knowing that there will always be enough.

What does this story tell us about our own time?
Does it offer us any insight,
As we try to understand a beast

That has been unleashed among us,
A beast that is bigger and more dangerous
Than any of the individuals
Forming or feeding it?

What does this story tell us about ourselves?
We are part of this story too,
This story of starvation in the midst of abundance,
Of resentment in the face of forgiveness.
We just can't see ourselves
As well as we see the other.

And we can't see where we're going.

Once this year's election is finally over,
These particular candidates and campaign rhetoric will fade.
But the volcanic eruption of fear and anger and hatred
Is here to stay, for longer than we would like.
Something dark and sorrowful and dangerous
Has come among us,
Has become part of us – or always was.
It will not go away when it is beaten at the polls.

How do we address it with love?
Not accept,
Not condone,
But address?

How do we see real people,
Made in the image and likeness of the living God,
Behind the shouting masks,
The waving signs,
The pointed guns and hate-filled speech?
How do we address the real issues,
Grievances, and inequities
That we must no longer avoid?

And how, then,
Do we offer the treasure we have received,
This good news

Of boundless abundance and
Strength in vulnerability?
Are we ready to be fools for love?

Is it time for us to let go
Of being the child in this story?

Can we become the welcoming and forgiving parent,
And so become agents of reconciliation
In a world that has more than enough contention?

Can we let go of what we believe is ours,
So that all can have enough?
Can we share the good news
That we have everything we need,
That love has no limits,
That everyone can fit on the inside
Of a circle that can always grow,
That we have more if we are generous
Than we do if we are hoarders?

Will we be found,
Watching at the window,
Ready to run to meet the other,
To embrace, enfold,
Forgive, and celebrate?

Jesus told this story
To a frightened people
In a time of political turmoil,
A people who did not know the best way forward,
Who blamed and shamed and shunned
Those who threatened them.
Jesus gave them this story
As a sign of the kingdom,
A surety of salvation.

It is ours now,
Not to hoard,
But to share.