

The Sunday Missive -- March 27, 2022

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Hymn 411 O bless the Lord, my soul

O bless the Lord, my soul! His grace to thee proclaim!
And all that is within me join to bless his holy Name!

O bless the Lord, my soul! His mercies bear in mind!
Forget not all his benefits! The Lord to thee is kind.

He will not always chide; he will with patience wait;
His wrath is ever slow to rise and ready to abate.

Then bless his holy Name, whose grace hath made thee whole,
Whose loving-kindness crowns thy days: O bless the Lord, my soul!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OoqmtXwRAc>

The Collect of the Day

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Joshua 5:9-12

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day.

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Psalm 32

Happy are those to whom the Lord sees no iniquity* ***And in whose spirit there is no deceit.***

While I kept silence, day and night your hand was heavy upon me* ***My body wasted away all the day long.***

Then I acknowledged my sin to you* ***And I did not hide my iniquity***

I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord* ***And you forgave the guilt of my sin.***

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you* ***And in the time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.***

For you are a hiding place for me O Lord* ***You preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.***

Many are the torments of the wicked* ***But steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.***

Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O you righteous ones* ***Shout for joy, all you upright in heart.***

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Hymn 455 O love of God, how strong and true

O love of God, how strong and true, eternal and yet ever new;
Uncomprehended and unbought, beyond all knowledge and all thought.

O wide-embracing, wondrous Love, we read thee in the sky above;
We read thee in the earth below, in seas that swell and streams that flow.

We read thee best in him who came to bear for us the cross of shame,
Sent by the Father from on high, our life to live, our death to die.

We read thy power to bless and save e'en in the darkness of the grave;
Still more in resurrection light we read the fullness of thy might.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtVuaHpWL9M&t=78s>

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he

began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Coming Home -- Lent 4C

What does the Lord mean when, in speaking to Joshua we hear: "Today, I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt?" What does the Psalmist mean when we say together that we are happy indeed only when our sins are covered and we no longer have deceit in our hearts because we are no longer silent? Whether or not we've been terribly riotous, we have all, perforce, like the Prodigal Son done some sinning – more than some, perhaps; less than many, propitiously – and it is always good to get back to a place we can call home, however new this home may be. Home is where a

new beginning has been made, however recently. Home is where we can begin anew our quest for the joys of good living, as outlined above, however complex our challenges may be.

Like the Israelites, while we are expecting and awaiting our beginnings, we eat the manna of hope. Once we make a beginning, we eat the produce of the land, produce that we ourselves cultivate. If we pay attention to our culture and the welfare of one another, by pursuing justice, mercy and humility, our produce will contain its own manna, the seeds of its own hope. For God knows and God insists that we accept that there will always have to be new beginnings. The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” The Lord promises that tomorrow, with God’s help, whatever disgrace, discomfort, grief or change we are undergoing will be rolled away too. We will once more taste of the sweet waters of grace. Justice will again roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Our family have spent a bit of time on the Gulf Coast of Florida, where my beloved parents lived, and often had the delight of kayaking through the vast mangrove forests, looking at more water birds up close than you can imagine, and always glad that alligators keep to the fresh water ponds nearby. We saw a big one of them too, crossing a gravel road from ditch to ditch. The mangrove is a strange and wonderful plant, preserving the stability of the barrier islands, but also always expanding its territory, in ways that can be aggravating to human beings. We like to carve out our own spaces and have them to ourselves, but the mangrove doesn’t pay any attention. A lovely analogy might be drawn from the mangrove for the impulse of mission: reaching out to one and all, to the ends of the earth; making new footholds and new islands wherever we go.

But I was struck by the bizarre tendrils the mangrove produces. Coming down from its branches are long rootlike cords with what looks like an ancient battle mace at the end of each one. The feelers at the end of the tendril go off in all directions, constantly searching, searching, searching for a new place to dig in, get rooted and start the process all over again. They are never home. How many of us are like this, always slightly discontented, and thus disconnected with the soil in which we have our roots; always looking for new territory, new faces, a better offer?

What is there in our lives that, in being rolled away might set us free of our discontentment and feeble connectedness? What is there in our lives that we keep silent about and deceive ourselves about – that secretly sets

us groaning and second-guessing all the day long: looking to move on? The 12-step programs of recovery – by which they mean re-discovery of the benevolent higher power often known as God – are full of proverbs that help people stay on “the beam.” One of them says, “You’re only as sick as your secrets.”

Each of us has a different list, a different order of secrets ranging from little habits to stubborn resentments and all the way up to life-threatening forms of institutional or interpersonal violence against ourselves or others. The circumstances and architecture of our enslaving Egypts – our besetting sins -- are uniquely ordered and constructed. They are built with mysterious, encrypted blueprints over the courses of our lives, out of parental influence, societal vagaries, coincidences and our own, ever-changing brain chemistry.

The tough nut, as the psalm had us singing about a few minutes ago, is that secrecy, that silence. We are enslaved when we deceive ourselves about who we are. There is no way God can cover up our sin and give us new chances if we refuse to acknowledge – to ourselves – what they are. It helps a lot to have other people to come clean with; that’s why a community life is richer than a solitary one. The good news is that God keeps on trying – standing there behind before beside and within us with a strong arm to pull us free from whatever it is that holds us back, the instant we ask.

And this is a bodacious, audacious god. One who will try anything and everything to get our attention and offer us assistance. Who, so they say, once actually blurred the line between human and divine in order to triage our condition, diagnose our secret sinfulness and commence treatment. St. Paul is writing about the necessity for us to remain aware of the un-humanness of God, for us to tap into and embrace the part of ourselves that transcends our worldly understanding, to know ourselves as very members incorporate of the body of a divine being in order to become free. Writes James Runcie: “God is neither darkness nor light, neither error nor truth nor, all told can God be affirmed or denied, whose incomprehensible transcendence is incomprehensibly above all affirmation and denial.”

But God does consider us family. Which brings us to the Prodigal Son. What are we to learn about life and sinning from this fellow? Is it an object lesson warning us against dissolute living? Not necessarily. Sure he spent everything, but if there hadn’t been that darn famine, who knows? Maybe he would have done a start-up and raised his own fortune. Ten, twelve years, he could have sold out for a bundle, had a couple kids of his own,

divided the loot between them, and continued the cycle. The famine was not a punishment, it was a full stop, a time-out, a do-over.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection are God's way of providing the time-out humanity so desperately needs. In Christ there is a famine of sorts, a complete absence of machination, of silence, of stratagem. God is with us in the flesh and so we can, if we are willing, safely encounter and accept complete knowledge of who we are, of what is holding us enslaved. It won't kill us – on the contrary, the awful truth will bring us back to life. All we have to do is listen and we can, as did the Prodigal Son, come to ourselves. His prodigality is not so much to return to others having failed to fulfill their hope and expectations, but a return from the despair and self-alienation to which he exiled himself.

He's out there in the fields, feeding the pigs. This is a humiliating job for a nice Jewish boy. Not only that, he's so hungry the stuff the pigs are eating starts looking plenty good. But he can't have any or he'll be punished – maybe killed – for stealing from the owner. Presumably he will get paid for the swineherding at some point, but he feels like he's going to die of hunger first. So, with the clarity that can come from weakness, he realizes who he is

He realizes who he is and merely determines to say it out loud to someone at home. And that's the whole game. His dad forgives him before he even says a word, while he's still a mile off; it's the intention that matters. Notice "I have sinned against heaven and before you" is the whole story. His father won't let him get out the words, "and I am no longer worthy to be called your son," because they are wrong. We do not lose our identity, our nature as children of heaven, as daughters of man and sons of woman by sinning, but only by self-deceit. It is the truth, not purity or perfection that sets us free. The truth is in our hearts, and will result in a changed life. If it's only on our lips, then we stay in Egypt's land, instead of coming home.

This is how we claim our kinship with the resurrected God. Like the Prodigal Son, we were dead and we become alive; we were lost and are now found. We kept our secrets, even from ourselves, but as we begin to see glimpses of ourselves of face-to-face, we are liberated.

Of course with knowledge comes responsibility. Little by little, we have to address the various tendencies, low self-esteem behaviors and negligent or violent habits that can pile up into new prison walls. It helps to have a

community like this one, based in faith and mutual accountability, where we can come and share our willingness to embrace our ever-new freedom. In our worship, work and friendship together, we enjoy God's embrace and find the spirit that propels us out into a secretive, complicated, dangerous, beautiful world as ambassadors of steadfast love.

Hymn 690 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore!

Open now the crystal fountain, whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through;
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield!

When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side;
Songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to thee!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lv_vzUs6i5s

Sonnet

The way the world is not
Astonished at you
It doesn't blink a leaf
When we step from the house
This leads me to think
That beauty is natural, unremarkable
And not to be spoken of
Except in the course of things
The course of singing and worksharing
The course of squeezes and neighbors
The course of you tying back your raving hair to go out
And the course of course of me
Astonished at you
The way the world is not

Bill Knott