

**Fourth Sunday in Lent [c]**  
**Joshua 5:9-12   2 Corinthians 5:16-21   Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**March 27, 2022 [Traditional]**

There's a man who grew up close by here, in a northeast Columbus neighborhood. A big Catholic family. He had a bad childhood. His father would come home from work, get drunk and abuse his wife and kids. Both his mom and dad would eventually die of liver problems. So this man lived in an emotional and spiritual chaos his whole childhood. But there was one thing that stood out from the chaos. His mother would take him to church with her every Sunday. He didn't really remember hearing any message in church. All he remembered was the peace and the order of the worship service, and the stained glass windows, the ancient beauty of the sanctuary. That was it. It was the one non-poisonous, non-lethal space in the chaos for him.

He went on to a life of drugs, violence, and crime. He joined a hate-group that I'm sure you have heard of. He was one of those people whom God had given such a strong constitution, such a toughness, such cleverness, such intelligence, such brightness and verbal ability, that he just would not die. He could damage himself and other people and drink and shoot up and fight and pass out and wake up and do it all over again, every day. And he could hold a job at the same time. One dangerous animal—that's what he called himself. While living in another state, he ended up killing someone in a fight. So he went to prison in his early 30s.

Because of his status in the hate-group, he had power in prison. He played a key role in the criminal prison economy. Disturbingly, he had access to all the drugs he could hope for. Ten years in, he did some violence, and got put in solitary confinement. Cut off from drugs, he started looking back on his existence. He came to the conclusion that he was a worthless piece of trash (his words). That's when he started talking to God for the first time in his life. He had a very simple prayer for a long time: *God: Just. kill. me.*

He had always been a big reader, but there was only one book he was allowed to read while in solitary. He kept looking at it, laying on the floor under his cot, and it made him remember the sanctuary, the stained glass windows, the quietness, his mom sitting next to him. After a couple of months, he finally picked the book up and started reading this section called "John." He made it to chapter 5. The story of the lame man who had been waiting 32 years to get in the healing whirlpool. But everyone kept getting in front of him and crowding him out, so he couldn't get in the healing water. Jesus came along and asked the lame man, "do you want to be healed?" The first time you hear that, it's like, "Duh." But then you think of it for a while. It's one of the most profound questions Jesus asks in the gospels. God comes to a man who has been crippled for 32 years, and he knows he needs to ask him: "*Do you want to be healed?*" The guy says "yeah." So Jesus tells him, "pick up your mat and walk." And he's healed. With Jesus there, he bypasses the competition to get into the pool altogether. He just gets up and walks.

That's the gospel passage that sunk in for this man in solitary confinement. That's the divine Word that killed him. One day, his prayer changed from "God, just kill me," to "God, can you heal...*me*?" Long story short, the man is in his late 60s now. From the day he left prison, he's been working hard and proclaiming his Savior Jesus Christ to everyone who will listen.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, everything changes for the younger son in the parable when he remembers the good life he had had on his dad's farm. He remembers the grace that God had given him at a prior time in his life. Likewise, with the man in my story: his mom had brought him to church when he was little. So when he saw the bible laying under his cot, he remembered the one non-poisonous, non-lethal space from his childhood. His mom, who loved him, had brought him to that place, and sat for an hour each week next to him there. And he knows *that* is why he picked up the book and started reading. That small grace that his mother shared with him is what prepared his heart to receive the word that changed his life.

It's just like the Son in Jesus' parable today. The lost son is sitting there covered with the consequences of his own decisions. Pig waste. And that's when, as Jesus says, he "came to himself." He saw what he was. And he says "wait a minute. I've known something better than what I'm covered with here." Dad's house! The boy knows where he can go, because he had experienced that grace in his life in a former time.

Now interestingly, even though he knows where go, he still does not know his father yet, does he! He rehearses a speech that he's going to give to his dad when he comes creeping back with his tail between his legs: "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." And it's all true, he is no longer worthy to be called his father's son. Dead true. But he doesn't know his father, does he. Before he can even start reciting his speech, his father runs down the road to him and throws his arms around him weeping with joy and love, he's so happy his boy has come back. The boy even tries to start his speech, but the father is like, "meh...no time for that. It's time to party because you are my son and you are back." That's the Creator of this Universe, revealed in Jesus Christ the Son. That's our Father in heaven. Humbling himself, running to us, to pick us up in his arms before we can even make our excuses. Praise God—that's who you and I are celebrating with in this place today. We're done with our excuses, our speeches. We're done with our posturing, our politics, with all the toxicity and death of this world. In Jesus Christ we're dead to all of that now, and we are alive with a Father who is throwing a party for us. That's whose table we're eating at here. This is the feast of victory. We can go out into the world as conquerors now.

What's our purpose here as God's Church? In terms of today's gospel, you might say our purpose here at St. John's is to give everyone we know a Godly memory, at the very least. God will work miracles with one good memory. And St. John's can give people a lot of those.

You and I as believers in Christ should know better than anyone else that we cannot save people. We cannot save this world with tools of the world. Once we get rid of that false Satanic delusion, we're liberated to do what God wants the church to do: to love people towards Jesus, who alone can save them. Our job is actually easier, I think, than we make it. It's to reflect Jesus to people, so that they want to come back. So that they know where the true home of all humanity is. It's in God. And here is where they're going to hear the Word of God, not just more humanism. We don't need to get caught up in the nonsense, like "the Church needs to show its colors, blue or red," or like the church needs to be "relevant" to the culture, or that it needs to tailor its message so people will buy it. Mainline protestants have been doing those things since WWII. They've become so in tune with the culture that now they're dying an ugly death with it. When non-churched people look at you and me, I hope they don't see culturally attuned people. I hope instead that they see our deepest treasure, treasure we know we have only by grace. If they see that treasure, they will want it.

If they look at God's church and see a reflection of the world—factions, virtue-signalling, self-righteousness, mean behavior, criticism, gossip and all the rest—they know it's pig waste. They've already got enough of that. Personally, I'm starting to think that the more obviously turned around and depraved the world becomes, the easier our job as the Church becomes. If we remember the Father who shows himself in the gospel lesson today, if we remember who has saved us and we show it, people are going to want what we have. Or, if not, maybe we will give them that one memory that will come back to them when they're covered with culture. Think of how simple that job really is. Instead of laboring to be culturally attuned, we can be an uncomplicated reflection of who we worship, the One whose kingdom is not of this world. Maybe the simplicity of our mission is what makes it hard for us. Because yeah, we're sinners: we want to make it about us. We're always laboring to prepare our speech, just like the Son in the gospel.

Or like the guy at the pool in John chapter five. Jesus asks him, do you want to be made well? And he's like, "well, yeah, but it's complicated. I've been trying to get in this pool for 32 years but all these people have been jostling me, and they're stronger than me. Playing politics. They're mean, and I always end up coming in last." That's you and me, playing the world's game. That's definitely the church playing the world's game. And here's Jesus telling us, "aren't you already done with all that pig-waste? You're done, because I'm here now. You don't need to go into that cesspool. Get up. Get up and walk!"

The house of God—the place where God and people meet—must always be a place of joy and love. It's sad that a lot of people today are losing joy in their faith. And the reason for that is pretty well recognized. It's today's all-pervasive consumer mentality. I only want products that fit my life, which I can use quickly, on my terms, to fulfill my emotional needs and reach my goals. Well, faith in Christ is about us being transformed through Jesus to fit into God's life. We ourselves become new products which God can use in the world to reach his goals. A consumer mentality is obviously not going to have a place in that life.

And it's never going to find lasting joy. Because when we're in that mode, everything gets old quickly. Including religion. Nothing really changes us. We're not looking for transformation, we're just looking to be filled. But unless my heart is transformed by the gospel and I have this new passion to become part of God's life, then I'm just stuck with my old self. No matter what form of new entertainment I find, no matter where I go, I'll be dragging the consumer self around with me. He'll never be satisfied.

God builds a house of joy for us on ground soaked with his own blood. Just like those brothers in the story sacrificed for each other beyond any thought of personal reward. That's God's love for us. and that's the love he wants us to experience towards him and towards each other...beyond all measuring.

In today's gospel, Jesus is in conversation with Pharisees. Now, the Pharisees were regular worshippers. They honored Scripture and studied it. They didn't compromise with the surrounding culture. But as the gospel portrays it, they had a problem with joy. So Jesus tells them one of the most memorable parables in all of scripture. A father's younger son is overcome with the consumer mentality. He treats his father as dead, takes his inheritance—he takes his future into his own hands—he runs away, and throws away all the money on short-term pleasures. In the end, he's sitting there covered in pig muck, and it finally occurs to him how good his father had been to him. So he crawls back home in shame. He rehearses a speech for his father: I'll be a servant to you, I know I don't deserve to be your son any longer. But the father doesn't seem interested in the speech. He is so overjoyed to see his son coming in his direction; he runs out of the house and down the road to meet him, he throws his arms around him; he never even thinks about punishing him. Instead, he throws a party, and fills the house with music and feasting and dancing and laughter. God is like that dad, says Jesus. Wherever that generous, forgiving, loving dad is, there's going to be joy in the house.

It is sad that anyone would stay outside that house of joy. But the older brother won't go in and celebrate. He's mad at his father for throwing a party for the irresponsible younger brother. But then you see: Just like he ran out of the house towards the younger

brother, now the father comes outside the house, outside the party, outside the joy and celebration, out to the older brother. And maybe that's you and me today. He comes out to the Pharisee, to each of us here, stuck in our legalism, stuck in our consumer mentality, one way or another *stuck in ourselves*. "What's wrong?" he asks. The older brother says, "I've served you all my life. I've never disobeyed you. You never gave a party for me. You know, THIS is the son that's really badly lost. The Father tells him, "Son, you are always with me. Everything I have is yours. Everything. There has always been a joyful party going on for you in this house, and you did not see it, because all you could see was what *you* were doing to supposedly 'earn' your inheritance. You never saw me right in front of you. But now I want you to come into the house. It's your house--the house of joy."

So now you and I have been brought in—through no merit of our own—to the expensive party God has thrown for us in Jesus Christ. Sometimes we're like the younger brother, with the consumer mentality. It's all about how we feel and what we want. And sometimes we're like the older brother. We work hard and we take life seriously, including our religion, and we get upset at people who don't. And we get stuck in our own righteousness. Just as trapped and dead in sin as the younger brother who leaves his dad behind. But God has come out into the darkness for us, to bring us into the house of joy. He's the one who pays for the party.

I recently read a piece by a woman who was reminiscing about her father. She said that when she was young, she was very close to him. She especially remembered the big summer gatherings with all the aunts and uncles and cousins. Inevitably, someone would put on polka music, and the family would dance. And when the "Beer Barrel Polka" played, her dad would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say, "I believe this is our dance," and they'd polka together. But when she was 15 years old, at the summer gathering, when her father tapped her on the shoulder, she snapped at him. And that was the end of them doing the beer barrel polka together.

She writes, "Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years. When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, in his old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him, 'What are you doing...why?' He would look at me with sad eyes and say, 'I was just waiting on you.' When I went away to college," she writes, "I was so glad to get out of that house and away from him. For years I never communicated with him, but as I grew older, I began to miss him. When I was 26, I decided to go to the summer gathering, and when I was there, somebody put on the "Beer Barrel Polka." I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance." He turned toward me and said, "I've been waiting on you."

Can we hear that voice at the center of our lives? The Father's voice: "Everything I have is yours. And I've been waiting on you. Come in to the house of joy."