

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 30, 2025

The Fourth Sunday In Lent (Laetare)

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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When the source of all life trembled.

“Think of the kind of community and the kind of world we can build in this way, where nobody who gets lost despairs of being rescued, nobody who is alone gives up the hope of finding a home to go back to, nobody who is withering or deprived of the chance of becoming fruitful again.”

Words from Fr. Gioia’s sermon last Sunday in which he beautifully explored how guilt can be so debilitating and sometimes prevent us from hearing words of forgiveness. I also loved the way that Luigi turned the English word ‘perish’ on its head and helped us understand the true meaning of the word in Greek as more like being *lost*.

Over these weeks of Lent, we are exploring what it is to be a Beloved Community and who our neighbor really is. On Saturday, Professor Sarah Coakley will give our Spring Lecture appropriately titled, “The Parish as Divine “Place:” The Healing of Body, Desire, and Society. I encourage you to attend to explore that theme as we continue to explore who is our neighbor and how we can be a beloved community.

On the first Sunday of Lent, I suggest that we take a good long look at ourselves and ask the questions, who we are, and where we are going in order to deepen our self-awareness. I suggested that we need to think about the masks that each of us love to wear and hide behind. Guilt, of course, can also be a mask that we so comfortably hide behind. It is only when we take those masks off, and begin to be true to ourselves that we can also begin to recognize those around us as brothers and sisters – who struggle with exactly what we struggle with. By unmasking our pretense; my facing up to our sense of guilt; by recognizing that we are lost, we actually open ourselves up for new possibilities. The possibility to hear that we are loved not hated; cherished not despised; wanted and not an inconvenience to be tolerated.

Do you remember last week’s wonderful Old Testament reading of Moses and the burning bush? I was so looking forward to preaching about it before I was trapped with 300,000 others at Heathrow airport! Well, I have to revisit it because I think it is so relevant to what Luigi and I are trying to explore.

When Moses met God on Mount Horeb, what did the Angel say to Moses from the middle of the burning bush? *“Take off your shoes, Moses, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”*

When Moses meets God, he has to acknowledge the presence of God and the Angel remind him that God’s presence makes the ground hallowed – holy – consecrated. The taking off of his sandals is a means by which Moses recognizes the holiness of God and the presence of God in his midst.

How often are we so full of our own cares and concerns that we fail to recognize the presence of God in our midst, especially in one who is different from us or, dare I say it, one whom we dislike or even distrust? When we meet such a person, do we treat them as if they, too, are on hallowed ground? And what of the people that we know? Our friends and even our families?

The parable of the Prodigal Son that is our Gospel reading today brings that same kind of self-disclosure to the heart of the relationships between God and humankind; between parent and child and, significantly, between the siblings also.

There are so many things that we can discover in this parable of Jesus! And, of course, it picks up the theme that Luigi preached about last week – Guilt; the guilt of the younger son that prompts him to literally pull himself out of the mud and go back home. However, I think that the name by which most of us know this parable – the prodigal son – is not quite accurate. Jesus, of course, does not give titles to his parables – we do! The parable could more accurately be titled ‘The Compassionate Father’ or even ‘The Two Sons,’ because the parable is as much about the Father and the older son as it is about the prodigal. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the prodigal son part of the parable is the easy bit! We like reading that bit because it’s not about us! After all, most of us don’t want to treat all the good things that God has given us with contempt; and in any case, the prodigal says sorry and all is made well. Or is it? For the image of the older son looms large in this parable, as it does in Rembrandt’s most famous painting now hanging in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. All of us can associate with the younger son saying sorry and being forgiven – that’s a nice story! But what if we are actually more like the elder son? Do you notice that after the father remonstrates with the elder son, the parable abruptly ends? I think if I were writing that parable, the son would come in, hug his brother and sit down to eat the fatted calf. What we are left with is what happens so often in society, in communities, and even in families. The elder son remains outside and refuses to go in

This is in sharp relief to the actions of the Father who is **moved with compassion** when he sees the younger son returning home.

This word ‘compassion’ in the Gospel should never be thought of as feeling sorry for someone. It is not even empathizing with someone. Since Luigi shared the real meaning of the Greek word translated as perish (that is, lost) last week, let me share the origins of the word ‘compassion’. The word comes from two words – com-passion – to suffer with. In New Testament Greek it is a fantastic word to say – the choristers would certainly enjoy it – σπλαγχνίζομαι whose root is σπλάγχνα – the word for bowels or intestines. In other words, when the father is moved with compassion, his whole insides turn upside down. The father does not pity the son, or even empathize with him; his whole inner being is churned up at the sight of him. What Jesus is saying is that the character of the relationship that God has with sinful humanity affects who God is. God is moved with compassion; God does not simply pity or empathize – God feels something in *his* inner being.

Speaking of this kind of compassion, Henri Nouwen says this:

“Compassion is such a deep, central and powerful emotion in Jesus that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lies hidden...When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God’s immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself.”

When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled!

I love the way that Hindus and Buddhists greet people; they put their hands together in the gesture of prayer and slightly bow towards them. They do this to acknowledge the presence of the divine in the them – recognizing, yes, that they are on holy ground for a moment. I am not sure that you can do that if you hate someone, or even dislike them.

At the moment, the volunteers at our Saturday Neighbor to Neighbor breakfast are worried about some of our guests. We are worried because they might be undocumented people; we are worried because we are not sure what we would do if the police came to check on their identity and ask if they belonged. But they belong in our little community because they are our neighbors, and we have discovered something of God's presence in our midst through meeting them. Compassion is not about pity or empathy; it is not even about trying to do good or to help someone in need. As Nouwen says so eloquently, *"When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God's immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself."*

or, as Luigi said last week,

Think of the kind of community and the kind of world we can build in this way, where nobody who gets lost despairs of being rescued, nobody who is alone gives up the hope of finding a home to go back to, nobody who is withering or deprived of the chance of becoming fruitful again.
