Fourth Sunday in Lent March 31, 2019

All Saints Church Year C

Joshua 5:9-12 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Psalm 32 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Dear Gracious God, thank you for true bread that gives life to the world. Amen

This is my Lenten practice: Pay Attention to Intention. It takes practice: to attend, to have the right intentions, to slow down, to listen, to be in the present, to see and to feel, to be aware. I often fail, but it doesn’t really matter- in fact “my awareness in failing” only gives me the opportunity to try again, and to be aware that I am trying again. I am putting myself in the hands of the Living Lord, 100 times a day. With the intention of surrender to ***What Is***.

When I was a child, I was taught to give up something that I valued during Lent. I had numerous lists- one year, I gave up ice cream, another year, candy; one year it was watching T.V., another year, reading comic books. One year I gave up fighting with my younger sister. We were only a year apart and very close, and yet we fought a lot.

I was the eldest, and my family was in the midst of some hardship, and as the eldest I (self-appointed, mind you), was the first to rise in the morning. I always laid my clothes out the evening before, so that I could dress quickly for school after all my morning chores. I stoked the woodstove in the kitchen; I made coffee; I set the table for cereal and toast; I made the four bagged lunches for school for me and my brother and sisters, and then I awoke everyone in the household.

I was very proud of myself. I felt important. I felt useful.

There was one glitch. My sister would put on my clothes before I could return to our room. I was aghast- how dare she? She shrugged, nonchalant. They were there, they fit, why not put them on? I was so angry, but I wasn’t supposed to be; it was Lent. I wasn’t supposed to fight. I had given up fighting. I tried to reason with her, but to no avail. Every morning, she had on my clothes.

She was ruining my Lent. She had no desire to do otherwise. And I was caught in that terrible grip between guilt (I had made a Lenten promise) and righteous anger (she was being unreasonable).

One day, my dear nana was visiting, and she pulled me aside, “Don’t put out your clothes, honey. Hide them.”

Oh my, what a simple solution! And so that’s what I did. And then a miracle happened.

My own anxiety, my own need to do the right thing, and my own anger lifted, and I could see. Being good and clever got out of my way.

My sister wasn’t putting on my clothes to make me angry or to be obnoxious. She was putting them on to be close to me. As a family, we were struggling; there wasn’t enough money; things were tight; a heaviness had descended onto our home. I dealt with it by being busy and “useful.” My sister dealt with it by trying to connect with me.

My sister was lonely and afraid and she didn’t know how to talk about it. By putting aside my anxiety about my clothes and everything else I was desperately trying to hold onto, I became aware of what was truly around me.

I moved from guilt to confession, and I forgave, not my sister, but myself, for not seeing. I had hurt my sister’s feelings. I had left her out.

And we began to talk- sister to sister. We were both afraid. What was happening to our parents? Why was there such sadness? What could we do? There was pain and suffering, ***and yet*** we were discovering a great joy, because we had each other.

By talking, connecting, laughing, teasing, and naming our fears and our worries, we felt connected, close, even hopeful. In the midst of the worry, we became certain about something else. We had each other.

I could see, maybe for the first time, my sister’s love for me and God’s love for me, for each of us, as great as the whole world. I began to trust in the idea of Abiding Love.

There’s a wonderful saying (*hadith*) in Islam attributed to God, “Whoever approaches Me walking, I will come to him running, and he who meets Me with sins equivalent to the whole world, I will greet him with forgiveness equal to it.”

Isn’t that how we see the father in the parable, who, when seeing his son in the distance, is filled with compassion and comes running to him, puts his arms around him and kisses him. And then, even before the son can get out his practiced speech of asking for forgiveness, his father starts preparing for a party. “My son who was lost is found and we are going to celebrate.”

This father running to his wayward child is a powerful image; one that I have relied on often throughout my journey of faith. God, as this father, not only waits for us, but pursues us, throws his arms around us, and kisses us, loving us to the ends of the earth.

Yet, today, I want to focus on the father’s relationship with the older son.

Dr. Amy J. Levine, a Jewish scholar whose expertise is analyzing Jesus’ parables, suggests another way to look at this parable.

She thinks it’s important to note that our gospel writer Luke, writes three parables in a row. The lost sheep among the other 99; the lost coin, and the lost son. Maybe two lost sons. Levine suggests that the parable is not about repenting (sheep and coins don’t repent, and neither son is repenting, either).

Rather, Levine thinks the parable focuses on what we lose, especially when we forget to count. What do we lose when we don’t spend enough time and awareness in our counting? Who gets lost when we forget to count?

I know that often the older son is portrayed as self-righteous, angry, self-absorbed, jealous, and even mean-spirited, yet notice that there is a rip-roaring party going on, and no one has thought to go and tell the older son. The caterers have arrived, the band has set up, folks are dancing, eating, laughing, and the older son is coming from the field after a long day of work. Hello!!!

Why did no one go to get the older son? He should have been one of the first to know his brother had returned. What was ***his*** agony over his brother’s disappearance? Why did that not matter? Why was that son left out? Why was he not counted? Especially within a parable that is all about grace and inclusion.

In this parable, we can interpret the father as God the Father. Yet, at the same time, we can also think of the father not as God the Father, but just a father, who fails like all parents. Parables allow that. We do not have to choose one interpretation over another. Both can be true.

We can see that in the father’s exuberance, he forgot to count the older son. As the parable ends, what kind of conversation will the father have with his older son?

I hope he can confess, be vulnerable, be aware, pay attention, and just like I did with my sister, who I also forgot to count, get closer to his older son, and to experience their bonds, their pain, their grief that even found its way to joy. And to remember with attention and intention, that the only thing we really have that lasts is Love.

Lent is our time of reflection and by necessity, we need to slow down and ask ourselves “Is my humanity in pace with my life?” Often, it’s not, either flying away out of control or grounding us to a halt, just like with this family we see this morning in the parable.

The hope is that we can confess, especially when we forget to count, and turn to each other and say, “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours; tell me how you are and let me be as present as I can be in your telling. Because in the end, that’s all that matters. AMEN