

St. Paul's Parish, Kent  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent, 18 March 2007  
The Rev. Allen LaMontagne, Rector

*A sermon preached on the Revised Common Lectionary Lessons and Gospel: Joshua 5.9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5.16-21; Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32*

The Fourth Sunday in Lent is called "Refreshment Sunday": a little relaxation from the rigors of Lent. And oh, what a picture of refreshment we have in the Gospel as Jesus is holding court. He is totally on. He's in a zone. It's open mike night at the Roadhouse Comedy Club, the one on the way to Jerusalem, and Jesus is knockin' em dead. With a cup of wine in one hand, his other arm draped over some scruffy tax collector's shoulders, Jesus and the sinners are experiencing that rare spontaneous synergy that comes when you least expect it, when you least try to have a good time.

Preaching and teaching and healing take a lot out of you. On the brink of burnout, tempted to give out, Jesus turns to those considered to be the crazies, the strung out, the fringe element. Himself feeling somewhat crazed, frazzled and outcast, his heart hopes maybe they'll understand me...

And boy, do they. Hunkered down with the bar crowd, energized by a spirited exchange like old friends at a reunion, everyone is caught up in the moment; everyone that is, except the Pharisees, whom Jesus sees across the room, in the back, barely in the doorway lest they be seen and thought to be party to this party. Jesus doesn't have to hear their words. He can read the scorn in their body language. Down-turned mouths betray their disappointment over the young Rabbi's apparent poor judgment: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus tells one more story before announcing he needs a short break... With the crowd pulsating with laughter and appreciation, he makes his way to the back of the room. Hugs and kisses along the way from his ardent admirers only further offend the Pharisees' sensibilities. As they make for the door, he catches up and asks if he might have a word with them before they go. He has something he wants badly to share with them.

In the parking lot, as is his way, Jesus speaks in parables. He launches into not one, but three: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and finally, the piece de resistance, today's Gospel... But he doesn't call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It's called the Parable of the God You Don't Know.

As he tells the story, things are clearer than since we've gotten hold of this bit of truth about God's world. Our take seems more often to be about the son's virtuous turn-around. Having learned some of life's lessons the hard way, he sees the error of his ways and does the right thing... Not entirely off the mark, but look a little closer at the story as it's written.

When everything has been spent, he is broke. Making matters worse, there is a famine going on. There are shortages everywhere--bad time to be on a spree. Just about to lunch with the pigs, his heart silently screaming for help, we read, "He came to himself." Now it gets interesting. Yes, he will tell his father he is sorry. But let's face it. His goal is to get something to eat! It reads, "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...' and so on.

***The point is: What matters in this story is not so much the integrity of the son. What this story is about is the Father's love.*** Consider that in this modern age running or jogging is a cool thing to do. But in Jesus' day, it is most undignified for a man to run. You see, the son is beginning to make his way back, rehearsing what he will say, probably expecting the worst, and so is utterly surprised when he sees a figure in the distance, hair askew, robes flying, dust swirling; it's his father--*running*--towards him. He might think for a moment of turning

around and running himself--in the direction *away* from his Father, who must have have gone mad during the time he has been gone....

But weak from hunger, he doesn't move so fast. His Father though, adrenaline pumping, heart nearly bursting with relief, Joy, Love--God, what Love--tackles the boy, pins him and beams broadly in his face; who in utter shock, can only mutter his rehearsed speech in monotone: "Father, I have sinned against...(sounds a little like Confession in here...) against heaven and before you" (fumbling for his notes) "...I am.. no..longer..worthy...I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." Phew.

Never mind that, Dad says. What can only be the song of the heavens--you think we sing Hallelujahs? Hear the Father's exultation--hear a real song of praise. "Quick," the Father says to the servants. "Bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet." Thus doing, he sets his son apart from the shoeless and plainly clad hired hands. The son, clothed in the finest things, is his father's pride and joy. Even though Dad may think to himself, "Oh brother, he is far from perfect. I hope we can keep him from wandering away again, but, right now, he is back. Not dead. he lives. Oh how I love this kid... Let's party!

Do we know this Father? Do you think the Church in the world knows *this* God? I'm going to say, not fully, not really. If we did, we would be a *lot* more joyful. Church would be the best party in town. But it is not.

By now, the Pharisees are walking away, shaking their heads. Crazy, drunk, they don't know what turns the once good, religious boy, the Son of Joseph, into such a miscreant. Ironically, it's their religion that shapes him, that sends him to fellowship with sinners. The Pharisees pray for him, but it is not to the God Jesus knows. His is the God We Hardly Know. The God who will run to us, if only we, his people, will stop, and turn from our ways of anger and hatred and inner strife, just stop, even barely turnaround.... so like One possessed with delirious, crazy Love, God will draw near to us and heal us.

The Church will wake up, break out of its torpor, when hearts turn as does the son's--even the slightest bit. We will begin to know the God we don't know when we admit, confess, for the most part, we are too often the humorless elder son. No wild and crazy guys are we Christians. We play by the rules, and expect others to. And it is serious business. **Have we ever really partied just *because* we are forgiven sinners? We don't party that way because we are too easily persuaded to think of ourselves not as sinful as others--and we hope that's enough to bargain our way into heaven. We are so bent on *not being that* sinful we miss both how sinful we really are and how forgiven we really are. We miss the party.**

*We* don't squander *our* resources, our substance, inherited or not. No loose livers, we. But religiously and too somberly, we trust our pensions and income more than we do the God We Don't Know to give us our daily bread... The Bread of Life, the One who walks slowly back into the Comedy Club, his face set for Jerusalem. He'll lighten up again, take the stage, enjoy his friends for as long as he can, knowing in his heart the bigger party--the one for all people, the Kingdom of God--is going to take some doing to get going. He'll give it his all to get them to laugh, to get us to see the humor in our human doings, everyone of them, and us. To get them, us, to repent, turn to God, to see what really matters; leave judgment to God: love God, and your neighbor as yourself--really. He'll die trying to get that across.

The God Who Knows Us better than we know ourselves picks it up from there. Stay tuned. It ain't over til it's over.