

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

March 6, 2016; the 4th Sunday in Lent

Readings: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32.

He Came to Himself

Before Jesus tells the parable, which became known as the parable of the prodigal son, something happens.

The parable is told in response to something that was happening fairly often as Jesus went about towns and villages and the countryside.

Jesus welcomed all who came to him...he even welcomed those who others condemned, tax collectors and sinners.

Perhaps the sinners were those who had done something morally wrong on a personal level,

and the tax collectors were also sinners but in a

societal way---these were Jewish people who were in league with the

Romans, collecting taxes for them from their own people,

for the Romans occupying their land,

and, it was known, collecting extra so has to

have something for themselves...tax collectors were traders; they hurt their own people, they were selfish...and viewed as lost by others.

The Pharisees and scribes were not wrong--these people were doing

things that were sinful...but Jesus sees deeper than that---Jesus

sees who these people really are at their core...Jesus sees the

good in them...Jesus sees deeper and broader...and

there's a wideness in God's mercy that Jesus

embodies.

Jesus, as our final hymn for today puts, Jesus reveals *God's hidden face*.

*In His (Jesus) living, in His dying, Your eternal love we trace.*¹

¹ "God, You sent your Son among us, Love from Love and Light from Light" Words: Herman G. Stuempfle (1923-2007), c GIA Publications, Inc., Music: *Ton-y-Botel*, Dr. Thomas J. Williams, 1869-1944

Others knew that about Jesus, and that is why, as Luke tells us:

"All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Of course they did...and the proper people of the society were offended. So Jesus tells them a story about a young man who asked for his inheritance so that he could go off on his own and do whatever he wanted to do.

It is the norm to get one's inheritance when one's parents have died and certainly in that time and culture...so much so that by asking for his inheritance, it was as if he was saying to his father---you are dead to me.

And then this younger son leaves traveling to as distant land to another country and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. He squanders his inheritance on carousing and then there is a famine and the only work he can get is feeding pigs, not a proper job for a Jewish man.

He is far from his father's house---lost, out of touch with who he is, out of touch with his family and his faith.

When have we felt lost?

We don't have to be far from home in a physical sense to be lost.

I thought it was so fascinating that as the TV show LOST was coming to its conclusion, some of the main characters made it off the island where they had been stranded when their plane crashed---they get home.

But it is at home that the main character, Jack, starts to get very lost, in drinking and drugs, as symptom of his feeling out of place, not where he belongs; he starts to look like he is stranded on an island as his beard grows out and his clothes look messy.

He is home but he is not at home.

On the Island, he looked healthy and other than being attacked by polar bears and kidnapped by the "others" from time to time, he was

happy; he was a leader; he had a purpose.

The prodigal son was out of place for along time or at least long enough to become completely lost, but it was in the muck with the pigs that we hear, “he came to himself.”

Those are very important words because they are a key to not being lost.

“He came to himself.”

The young man realizes, has an epiphany, that he needs to reclaim his true identity.

Have you ever had a realization like that?

That you needed to reclaim your true identity or live into it for the first time?

Coming to oneself happens for many reasons and in many ways.

Lent itself is a time set aside for us to consider just this sort of thing...how can we be more the persons God has created us to be, in the sense of our relationship with God, others, and ourselves.

For some, a spiritual experience of God brings one to awareness of who one truly is.

For some coming to love themselves, know themselves for who they are---loving ourselves for who we are---be that related to sexual orientation, or gender identity, or recovering from an abusive relationship or an abusive situation...brings us to an awareness of who we truly are.

“He came to himself.”

Coming to one’s self is not necessarily easy...there can often be a cost because we can’t continue go along with the way things have been.

Sometimes a big cost; sometimes we lose jobs; sometimes we lose friends; sometimes we lose family.

When we tell that person they can’t hit us any more or yell at us any more, when we come out of the closet and know we might lose our job, when we realize we are going to have to deal with the things that drug and or alcohol

have been helping us to avoid...there can be a cost.
There can even be great cost, but not as big a cost as being personally
lost, or living a lie, or living in fear.
Nothing hurts so much as not being the people God has created us to be.

There was a great cost to the young man, the prodigal son, in his case, he
had to admit that he was wrong...he was fearful of the punishment it
might receive or that he would be rejected out right, for that
was a reasonable expectation in that culture, that his
father would not recognize him as a son again.
And as the story goes, the young man goes back to his father to ask to be
treated like a hired hand.

This dynamic of being lost and found is often, I think for most people, an
on-going sort of thing...some days we feel lost and other days very
very found.

That's what it is to be human.

Sometimes as we start to find ourselves, we feel more lost than ever.

In the story of the prodigal son, it is the older son who represents all those
people who are not so sure they like this mercy thing...this
forgiveness...this grace that the Father is giving, freely, willingly with great
joy even.

This older son can also represent the part of ourselves that is not forgiving
of ourselves...resisting the return, giving many reasons why it won't
work, shouldn't work.

The Father, God, reassures people such as that son, and the parts of
ourselves that resist the grace, saying it shouldn't be that easy---God
reassures that judgmental older son that God's love is so big
that no one and no part of ourselves is outside of God's
love and mercy.

Our church is here to welcome each of us back week by week, and we
come more and more to ourselves, week by week.

Our church is here to be a place where real people with real struggles can

find companions for this journey back to ourselves.

In some ways, the prodigal son story is simple with just a few actors, and it was the son's choice to lose himself in his poor choices, and when he wanted to go home, he was able to get there by himself. For many in our world, they become lost in a large part because of other people's choices or the soul crushing circumstances in which they grow up or live as adults.

Often people can't just decide to go home on their own...they need help. Thankfully, there are many individuals and organizations that do help.

As part of the *WomanKind* conference last weekend here in Richmond, people from *Thistle Farms* spoke and sold their products.

Their line of products such as soap and lotions are handmade by women who have found themselves through their program.

These are women who have survived prostitution, trafficking and addiction.

More than 50 have jobs making the products, and more than 700 women are helped annually through the two-year residential program and advocacy services.

The love of the founder of *Thistle Farms*, Becca Stevens, and all who work with these women, enable so many to find themselves again or for the first time.

Reading some of their testimonies, I was struck by one woman who spoke of how amazing it is that the program is free to those who who need it.

What an example of the sort of love, mercy and grace we hear about in the story of the prodigal son, but updated to include the more complicated aspects of how people become lost...how they are helped to find themselves is very similar --- the Good News visible in the world.²

² www.thistlefarms.org, from their website--Thistle Farms is a powerful community of women who have survived prostitution, trafficking and addiction. We employ more than 50 survivors through our social enterprises which include a natural body care company, Thistle Stop Cafe, artisan studio, and global marketplace called Shared Trade. Started in 1997 by Rev. Becca Stevens under the name Magdalene, Thistle Farms includes a two-year residential program and advocacy services for up to 700 women yearly. We provide education and training annually through speaking events and immersion workshops. Thistle Farms and Becca Stevens have been featured on numerous national platforms including the *The Today*

We at HoCo also make the Good News visible in the world in ways that we hope help people know who they are, the beloved of God, worthy of love and respect, of care and compassion.

As I have been saying on the this sermon, we are all on this journey of “coming to ourselves,” of knowing that we are God’s beloved and worthy of love, respect, care and compassion.

I have a description, a sentence, that I use as my social media bio---when twitter asked for something and it could only be 100 characters or something...it actually inspired this:

Still seeking; sometimes finding; always found.

I find those thoughts helpful---helping me to be gentle with myself---we are always in process.

We are always found; God’s love embraces us always and therefore we are never truly lost.

All people are united with God as children of God,
and for Christians, we have been united with God through Christ in Holy Baptism, sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.

Remember that if you are having a lost feeling and or if you are in the midst of really finding yourself and everything seems to be shifting, remember that you can never truly be lost as you are united with God---God who is always with us; God who is always welcoming us home to ourselves---running to meet us with arms outstretched.

Amen.

Show, A Path Appears on PBS, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, ABC World News with Diane Sawyer, and NPR. Thistle Farms stands for the truth that, in the end, love is the most powerful force for change in the world.