

Sermon – “Loving Embrace”

Sunday, March 6, 2016

Scripture Readings – Joshua 5:9-12 and Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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This week’s presentation of Handel’s *Messiah* is *Surely He Hath Borne our Grievs* based on the suffering servant song in Isaiah 53. Through poignant words and music, this oratorio alludes to the human suffering and grief embraced by One to whom it does not belong. When Christians hear these words from Isaiah, we think of Christ’s redemptive suffering on the cross.

Our first scripture reading is Joshua 5:9-12. Here we read about the transition of the Israelites from life in the wilderness to life in the Promised Land. After 40 years of waiting, this joyous homecoming has finally arrived. The ritual event to prepare the people is the Passover meal. The change in their lives is symbolized by the ceasing of the manna. In their new home, they eat the crops of the land. May our hearts and minds be open to the hearing and understanding of God’s Word.

9 The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And so that place is called Gilgal to this day. 10 While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho. 11 On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 12 The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

Homecomings need rituals and celebrations to mark their significance. Our second scripture reading is Luke 15. This familiar parable is about the homecoming of a young man, the rituals and celebrations that followed and the dilemma this presents his overjoyed father who had two sons. There are two theological interpretations of this story. The first is that the "younger or prodigal son" represents the sinners and tax collectors and the "older or stingy brother" is the religious community. Another interpretation is that the "older brother" represents the ongoing Jewish community and the "younger brother" represents the Gentile Christian community, both children of God—both living in the household of God and both needing to recognize and affirm the other’s presence and unique relationship to the father. Hear now the word of God as recorded by Luke.

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable: 11 "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But 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! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he

was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. **21** Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." **22** But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. **23** And get the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; **24** for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. **25** "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. **27** He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." **28** Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. **29** But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. **30** But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" **31** Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. **32** But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "

The title of the sermon: *Loving Embrace*

Text: But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Luke 15:20b

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, who welcomes your children home with a loving embrace, thank you for loving each of us and all of us. May the words of my mouth and meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

It was 1971, the summer after my freshman year in high school and my brother's freshman year in college. We lived in South Holland, a suburb of Chicago. Barry had spent his first year at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale after getting a high draft number during the Viet Nam war. It had been a long summer with him living at home after a year of "being on his own." The rules at "15583 Orchid Drive" were different. The fact that his hair was in a ponytail was no longer an issue for my parents. They were just delighted that both their daughters' ponytails were much longer than their son's.

At the end of this long summer, my brother decided he needed some time to be alone and made plans to spend a night by himself at the Michigan Warren Dunes. He would hitch-hike there and back. My mother felt this was too dangerous and so my brother made other arrangements to drive there with a friend. He was on his way Friday afternoon and everything would have been fine if Barry's friend had not called that evening to ask for Barry. My mother explained that my brother was with him on their way to Warren Dunes...something he claimed he knew nothing about.

We expected Barry to return the next day around 6:00 p.m. to a homecoming that was not going to be pretty. I guess it was about 10:00 p.m. Saturday night when we really began to worry. It had been raining and lightning for a couple of hours and there was no sign of him. By 1:00 a.m. Sunday morning, my father and I began driving along the highway to look for my brother...it was still pouring down rain. We returned in an hour with no sign of him. I didn't sleep that night...no one did. We prayed and we worried, and our imaginations were merciless!!

At 5:00 a.m. my dad and grandparents left for the dunes...a two hour drive. They were at the campgrounds by 7:00 a.m. and talked to different campers who were drenched from the storm. No one knew my brother. They returned by 10:30 a.m. and we were all sitting around the kitchen table wondering if we would ever see Barry alive again... when we heard a car door open and close and my brother's voice saying in the distance "Thanks for the ride." Then we heard him whistling as he walked down the driveway.

I stood in the background in our kitchen and I watched my father and my mother embrace my brother. We were all crying because we were so happy to see him alive. No one cared what he needed to do that weekend. We thought he was dead and he was alive and we celebrated his coming home. We sat around the kitchen table (didn't make it to church that Sunday) and listened to his story, we yelled at him, and laughed and cried. He decided to stay another night because of the storm and couldn't get to a phone (no cell phones back then). My dad and grandparents were about 50 yards from where he camped. To be honest with you, I don't remember being seriously angry at him because we were so frightened that we had lost him.

I suppose this brief experience in my growing up only touches on the feeling this loving father felt when his youngest son who had been gone for several years walked down the driveway that day. He knew his son from afar, he ran shamelessly to him and embraced him. He kissed away the long rehearsed confession. He called for a celebration and gave command for *the best robe, a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet...*all signs that this was his beloved child.

A Buddhist story from *The Sacred Books of the East* on a parallel theme shows the father for twenty years hiding his identity from his son, meanwhile watching and harshly testing until penitence was fully proved and a nobility won through trial... but not this father. There was no quarantine; for the younger son had been dead...and he was alive. He had come home and was welcomed with open arms and a loving embrace.

In Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* he reflects on Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son, which can be found at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. In the painting, the nature of God's compassion is captured, not in the face, but in the hands that embrace the younger son. Nouwen writes:

The true center of Rembrandt's painting is the hands of the father. On them all the light is concentrated; in them mercy becomes flesh; upon them forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing come together. From the moment I first saw this painting... I felt drawn to those hands. ... The two are quite different. The father's left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular... Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grasp. How different is the father's right hand! It is refined, soft, and tender. The fingers are close to each other and they have an elegant quality. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand. As soon as I recognized the difference between the two hands, a new world of meaning opened up for me. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand... He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present.

Nouwen concludes: *And so under the aspect of an old Jewish patriarch, there emerges also a motherly God receiving her son home... But her joy will not be complete until all who have received life from her have returned home and gather together around the table prepared for them... And this includes the elder son.*

And so when the patriarch gets word that the older son is angry and refuses to come in, he also goes out to entreat him with a loving embrace. Because the father understands his firstborn's point of view, he listens to his feelings and then gently reminds his son that all they have shared over the years is something no one can take away from them--not even his younger brother. The loving embrace of one child is not the rejection of the other.

And so we find in this parable a profound understanding about the nature of God. We no longer need to seek being the favored son or daughter. Our religion need not be elitist. In fact, this is the antithesis of who our God has been revealed to be in Jesus Christ. Each of us has a place in our Creator's heart. We are all God's favorites! And nothing would please God more than a greater wideness in our mercy toward one another that we might embrace our brothers and sisters who also belong to God.

To those of us who live at home, let us remember to make merry with our friends, to ask for the goat, and to celebrate our life together. And when our brothers and sisters come home, let us welcome them with a loving embrace. If any of us thinks we deserve to be around the table more than someone else...or are more welcome... we do not understand the nature of our Patriarch who is both mother and father.

And to those of us who are not ready to come home quite yet...may we be assured of God's loving embrace when we do... and that nothing would bring our family more joy than to hear us whistling down the driveway. Amen.