

Lent 1V Luke 15

It just doesn't get any better than this!

This is scripture at its absolute finest – brilliant, real, simple....clearing away the noise and the clutter and cutting to the quick. To the heart of the matter – the heart of US.

This – this stuff enters you and goes right to that part of you that, like a tiny frightened bird, terrified, freezing at the sound of danger, yet heart hammering...would risk everything and take on anything to protect its young....

It touches you that deeply. Gently gathering that little bird, and says to that brave and fragile spirit that is you....

You're ok now. I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe. Welcome home.

These parables are beautiful. Superbly written....and delightful on the tongue as you speak them – and so multi-faceted that we can only choose one way to look at them today.

They're like a precious jewel that the light shines through. Hold it up, turn it this way and that....

Or

As we said last week, like a mischievous little bird, hopping from branch to branch in a tree, saying find me now....no find me now....

And sometimes like those ravens in the parking lot who may hop sideways - Once - to give you a break and look at you as if to say "are YOU looking at ME?"

To me, it's breath-taking how the Spirit works that way in scripture.

We've been considering, during this Lenten season, questions of suffering.

Why it is that suffering exists.

Does God will it?

Why doesn't God DO something about it?

And we've been pushing one another to go deep into the questions, rather than looking for a fast and easy answer.

Go deep.

What about suffering. IS it God's will?

Is it redemptive? Is it necessary for salvation? Your own suffering or the suffering of Jesus? Does God require suffering in order to bring us into the Divine reign and realm that some call the Kingdom of God?

If you say no, you understand that you're standing in opposition to the most common Western theological understanding of Jesus' death....that it was necessary for him to die – that it was God's plan and will....this is NOT THE ONLY WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS' DEATH, and it has never been the only way....but certainly it has become the most widely understood and misunderstood take on Jesus' death. "he died for our sins". Is this where you stand? DOES God require suffering?

Once again, our texts give no answer. Rather they engage us in a story. Last week, we heard people ask Jesus about the suffering of the innocent.

"At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices". (Luke 13: 1)

And Jesus answered with a story; a story that calls us not to get caught up in the questions so much that it keeps us from action, from producing the fruit of the household of God.

This week, the texts move from "out there" to "in here". These are very intimate, personal stories.

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost"

A woman and a coin. In those days, women would have their dowries sewn onto their head dresses. This was no ordinary coin that she has lost – it's something very precious. It had emotional value....like losing your wedding ring. This is a loss that takes a piece of YOU with it.

"Which one of you, having 100 sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance."

The shepherd. This too, is not about property, not merely income, an object, but rather an animal that the shepherd has raised, cared for, protected. The loss is personal.

Have you ever lost something like that? You know the intensity of the feeling...the panic, the passion, the pain? In that – in those feelings, is a key to understanding life, Jesus is saying, and the Holy One. Understanding who God is and HOW God is.

THAT, Luke says, is what God feels when we are lost.

That's what we feel like when we've lost something precious, and in that feeling there is a key and a clue to something very important.

And then, Luke moves on....from losing something

To losing someone.

Listen to the story again.

There was a man who had 2 sons. 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. 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. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 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. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, and not one gave him anything. 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. I will get up and go and say to my father, "father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands". 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. 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'. 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and his alive again; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

BUT the elder son was in the field. And when he came and approached the house, he heard music, and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied' your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back, safe and sound.' Then he became angry, and refused to go in . His father came out and began to plead with him. 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him.'

Then the father said to him: 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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 human drama here is exquisite. I won't dwell on it, but just point out a couple of things:

First, when the kid first asks for his inheritance, it's so rude.....it's like saying "look dad you're going to die anyway some day and I'll get it, so why not give it to me now?"

And second: it's not that the father has to go down and cash in some bonds or RRSPs ... this is LAND. This is family fortune; who knows how long that land had been in the family and what the dreams of the father had been; perhaps that the boys would farm it together....likely **never never** that he'd have to sell it off for cash; that it would mean so little to that boy.

Third, he comes home why? Because he's seen the error of his ways? No....because he's broke. He comes home with a prepared speech to manipulate his dad, he practices the speech.....

Fourth, notice the real pain of the older brother.

And finally, the father, who lowers himself, it was considered most undignified to run in public – a man would simply never do that' in those days, we're told. He doesn't care. He publicly humiliates himself to run to meet that boy.

It's beautiful.

Have you ever lost someone? Have you been the dad? The prodigal? The older brother?

These feelings are real, and raw. They are clues to the heart of God.

Remember that we've been trying to look at these Lenten readings through the image of birds?

What bird image comes to mind here?

This week I read about homing pigeons. And what scientists seem to say is that they can describe what homing pigeons do, but not how they do it. Homing pigeons have a built-in sense that leads them back to the place they were raised, no matter how people try to fool or confuse them. It's in their make-up – part of what they are.

That sent me back to a book I read recently, that said essentially the same thing about humans. Fran Ferder and John Heagle in a book called *Your Sexual Self* say this:

Built into our very molecules is an energy of attraction, a quest for union, a drive to be together and a yearning for home. This is true, they say, at the level of our atoms, it's true for galaxies, stars, families, nations, persons, ecosystems and oceans. At every level of creation there is a drive - a seeking, and yearning for union. A desire for love, a search for home, to find the lost.

They call it cosmic allurement. We call it love. We call it God

And it's built into our very genes. "Our hearts won't rest until they rest in Thee" is how an old hymn says it. WE are homing pigeons. SO IS GOD. Maybe that drive in us IS God.

Luke's stories tell this in a more personal intimate way.

The truth about us; about who we really are, is here in these stories.

With this story we tap deeply into very personal feelings – the heartbreak of the father, the shame of the prodigal, the bitterness of the older brother....and the question at the end that is never answered....did they ever get together? Did the older brother go into the party? We don't know. And that's true to life too....it's open, isn't it? We're free. WE have choices. And our lives are somehow always in that moment of choice...that between time....always choosing.

And always searching.

AND SO IS GOD.

The evidence abounds. The restlessness in your soul? That yearning or aching that's sometimes there? That's a prayer. It's a sign of the presence of God in you. Your very being longs for home. You are a homing pigeon!

We are hard wired to love. It's built into our very molecules to seek justice, peace, right relationships, to seek the lost. That impulse is God in you. The image of the very living Lord of Hosts working its way in your being.

Seeking the lost. Seeking home. For ourselves, for others. For prodigals and older brothers and coins and sheep....

The call today is to return. Return home to the stuff that is most deeply truly YOU.

God is always seeking us

And we are always seeking God

Thanks be to God - Amen