

Lent 4 - March 14, 2010

The Rev. Graham Bland

Last Sunday evening we had a wonderful gathering here as St. James' youth led worship in the style of Taizé. Taizé is the French community that many of them have visited or will soon visit. The youth bear witness to their experience there, saying it was transformative for them. Others say of them, "They came back changed."

An important part of the service was silence – 12 minutes. Some said that was the best part.

Integral to the contemplative traditions of Christianity and other religions is the practice of silence. In silence, we come to God in a new way as we also come to ourselves in a new way.

It's so hard to find yourself, let alone God, in all the noise that surrounds us. So the experience of being "lost" may be one that our culture knows particularly well.

At LHSC where I work Monday to Friday, there've been a lot of changes, offices and clinics moving, new construction, very confusing. Even I get lost there! So it's not unusual to encounter people who say they're lost, or who look lost but won't admit it! The first group asks for directions, apologetically as if they should know better. The second group scratches its head, stares at signs or down hallways, but when you ask, "Are you lost?" they respond, "Oh no, we're fine!" Like you might try to charge them for directions or sign them up for a subscription to Watchtower!

When Jesus tells today's parable of the Prodigal Father – a 'true' story on many levels – he is addressing himself to two main groups. There are the tax collectors and sinners, and the scribes and Pharisees. In the story, the younger brother represents the first group, the ones outside the law and the older brother the second group, the ones inside the law. God reaches out to both brothers, both groups, because both of them are equally lost, and in similar ways – just that one group knows it, the other doesn't.

Our younger brother asks his father for his share of the inheritance – a highly offensive thing to do; like wishing that his father were dead. He then goes off to a far country and squanders it all until, finally, down and out in a pig-sty (the most unclean place imaginable), he comes to himself, and realizes he must return home. He believes, for shame, that he will need to live as a slave in his father's house.

As he approaches home, his father sees him from afar, runs to embrace him and there follows a great celebration. The

father will not entertain the idea that his own son might become a slave in his house. He welcomes him home.

There is a modern Christian song, “When God Ran” that declares the only time God ran (since Jesus never once ran from suffering or from death) ... was when he “ran **to** me” in mercy, forgiveness and welcome, overjoyed I had come back home to God.

Why have millions listened to that song on You Tube, why does this story of the Prodigal Father’s great love so resonate with us all? It must be that so many of us know that experience ... of feeling far from God, lost in our own sense of unworthiness ... feeling too unworthy to allow ourselves to accept God’s welcoming grace.

This is a powerful human story, made even more telling by its other story-line, from the side of the older brother.

As he witnesses the great welcome lavished on his younger brother, he becomes lost in his own jealousy. Having worked like an obedient slave for years, he deserves more than this.

The brothers show that there are at least two kinds of slavery; one imprisons people in guilt and shame and the other in resentment and jealousy.

It’s ironic that the older brother **also** feels like a slave in his father’s house. Having tried to gain his father’s favour through work, he compares the quality of his own efforts with his brother’s, and of course he must be better than that reprobate!

Which of us has not also at one time or another sat in judgment upon one of our human brothers or sisters, or believed we merited God’s mercy more than they? “I’ve lived a good life ... Why is this happening to me?”

Yet the father welcomes both brothers unconditionally into his house.

God desires that none of us be lost. When we are lost to our unworthiness or self-righteousness, we are equally lost. Yet the Father runs to us, embraces and calls us to celebrate that we have been found by him. We do not need to come groveling back, but only turn to God and it is enough – there is celebration in God’s house!

So what must we do when we become lost in our own shame or resentment? Must we journey to a far country in order to come to ourselves? The geographical cure does not usually work if the soul is not also on a journey. And the secret of the soul’s journey is that it is best made with trustworthy friends and companions – the kind we find in a community like ours.

Taizé is teaching our young people, without doubt, that often the longest journey may be into our own heartland and the farthest country may be close at hand. I believe that the community they are building with one another here is helping them to create the conditions to go in safety on the journey to their own hearts.

For all of us, the journey into our own shame and resentment is one we must take if we are to come to wholeness. We will likely not be able to extend welcome to others who are on this journey if we have not been willing or able to venture down this path ourselves.

How did the Prodigal Father find it in himself to extend welcome to his sons? Only, I believe, because he too had once come to himself out of the depths of his own sorrow and despair.

And on the level of this community, the call of this Gospel is to follow the Prodigal Father who, after his own journey to the heart of humanity, can then run down the road to embrace the sons and daughters who turn toward home.

Now I believe that it is vital for us all to find and create relationships of trust so that we do not have to follow Jesus alone. So one question the Gospel raises today is, Can we find ways to become trustworthy companions in the faith for one another and for those who join us.

Each church is called to build such a community of welcome and celebration that it can embrace the whole experience of every human soul with humility and mercy.

Heaven knows what a challenge that can be! Just this week, 100 American Anglican parishes defected to Rome because they fear our Church is too liberal in ordaining women and in some places blessing same-sex unions.

Community cannot be built on fear, only on love. Yet God does not force our hand. Have you ever tried to force anyone to do **anything**?

It's like that old joke about how many Californians it takes to change a light bulb – just one, but the bulb has to want to change! Wholeness cannot be forced, it must be chosen.

God knows this about us up close and personal, because Jesus walked this path of human life with us. We cannot be **taught** this path in life. As the poet Machado says, “The path is made by walking.” We have to live it, find it for ourselves, painful though it may be for each one of us.

It is good also to know that God has taken this same journey into a far country, and in Jesus has encountered the depths of human sorrow and despair.

In Jesus, God has already journeyed to the heart of human need, to the heart of our human experience. Jesus calls us back to God’s own heart.

And on this path it is far better to go with companions than it is to go it alone.

Our young people are learning this secret of community. We are privileged that they are also teaching us ... that what our church community is for is to declare how God longs for us and to create bonds of affection and trust where we can all be strong for the journey home.

And by the way, when we arrive, there will be a party! Thanks be!