

## 4 Lent C - 14 March 2010

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

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What will it be like to wake up in heaven? In some form or another, this is a question for many people. I read where a physician, Dr. Janet Campbell, went it to see a patient of hers. The patient is just starting to come around from the anesthetic. Dr. Campbell notes that one can here chimes sounding off in the distance from a clock in the hospital waiting area. The patient is rousing now. "Oh, listen to that," he mumbles. "I must be in heaven."

Even people not particularly religious, but participant in our 'Christ-haunted culture,' as author Flannery O'Connor puts it, assume that God, as higher-power, is not only just toward others but also merciful toward themselves. And they wonder, 'What will heaven be like?' We can leave their assumption for reflection on some other day. But we do well to keep in mind the insight of 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian Augustine of Hippo. Augustine predicted that upon arriving in heaven the Church shall discover that God has some that we do not, and we have some that God does not.

Yet even this insight leaves empty a specific description of what heaven is like. I think people looking to scripture for an answer find that, beyond the mysterious book of the Revelation, scripture offers almost nothing about what heaven 'the place' is like. But scripture does offer many clues in descriptions there of the behavior of God and God's people. This is something for Christians to remember when they are gathered together in the blessings of fellowship with one another and the worship of God. It is something for Christians to remember also when they are out and about in wider society or even just in their homes.

What people do and what they avoid doing are descriptions of what they believe God to be like and of what they believe to be their heaven. At the same time, people perceive what seems to be the behavior of God as description of what heaven is really like.

In the Old Testament Reading for this morning, the Hebrews have finally arrived in the land promised to their ancestors long ago. So, God says to the people, "I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And we may wonder, what shame or disgrace could be attached to the Hebrews for the slavery that their ancestors suffered at the

hands of others? God understands, it seems, that while they know better intellectually, yet still the people blame the slaves for the behavior of the slave masters.

So God's behavior is to assure the people of forgiveness, even where there is nothing to forgive. God is that good. And the people's behavior is to respond with celebration. Heaven is that good.

And this is what the Apostle Paul means when writes to the early Christians that 'God in Christ was reconciling the world to God, not counting their trespasses against them.' God's behavior stands in sharp contrast to what seems intuitively fair and reasonable. God is like that. Heaven is like that. So, says Paul, 'Be reconciled.' God's way is to invite us, call us, beg us, to accept that in Christ Jesus, you and I are reconciled to God. Be reconciled. It really is that plain and simple. And the more we take this in the more our behavior reflects it to one another and to the world around us: this unimaginable actuality that God's behavior toward people really is that generous and that good.

This is what Jesus is claiming in this story that he tells in today's Gospel. It is familiar to many as 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son.' And I think at least partly because most people do not know anymore what the word 'prodigal' means, scholars, authors, and preachers often today try to recast the parable as the parable of the generous father. But honestly, the father's great generosity becomes lost if we set aside the prior prodigal behavior of the son.

The son requests of the father his inheritance. His action is premature since the inheritance really is not an inheritance until the father dies and leaves it to him. But the father gives it to the son, anyway. Clearly the father is generous. One could argue that he is generous to a fault. In fact, given that Jesus' audience for this story is comprised of his theological and philosophical opponents, the people hearing this story the first time it is ever told are probably thinking exactly that.

The son runs off to some place far away from home, far away from the father, and tears through his

inheritance pretty quickly. 'Dissolute living' is the way the scripture reads. And this is yet another term that people hardly, if ever, use. But, as it happens, 'dissolute' and 'prodigal' are actually related in meaning. Prodigal does not describe the son's grief or sorrow. The title 'The Prodigal Son' does not mean that the son is repentant. 'Prodigal' means 'extravagant.' The parable is about 'The Extravagant Son.'

And one can just imagine, I think, that as Jesus is telling the story, as he is describing the son's decline from living it up with his new-found money-bought friends to the pathetic status of a Hebrew lad hiring himself out to watch over a herd of pigs, one can just imagine the Pharisees and scribes nodding along with an I-told-you-so smirk across each face and an I-told-you-so self-righteousness in each heart. How surprised are they, I wonder, to find themselves apparently in agreement with Jesus?

But Jesus continues, and I think their surprise fades to something else; to something more along the lines, I suspect, of outrage. The son determines to return to the father. He plans to own up to his extravagance and wastefulness. And he plans to accept from the father, if only the father will be so generous, the diminished status of hired hand. Yet, any words of confession and repentance that the son is able to offer go completely dismissed by the father. Instead the father has been watching for the son, waiting eagerly for the son's safe return. Rushing the son with his welcome home, he says not a single word of forgiveness to him.

And here, I think, is where heaven is revealed in the behavior of God. And for those expecting a story of a father's angry wrath, those expecting confirmation of the wrath of a stern and angry and impatient God, are surprised to say the least, disappointed is more like it, and given what it says about God and about heaven, they are likely outraged.

Think about the sin of the son in the story. What was his behavior? He did not steal, he did not murder, he did not lie. His sin, if it is a sin at all, is his extravagance. If this story is meant first and foremost to convey to Jesus' followers, to you and me, God's behavior toward sinners, then would it not be much better to include an obvious and genuine sin? Jesus' extravagance with the Love of God is

the sin in the minds of those whose own behavior tells the story of the strict and punitive god whom they worship, of the god that they have created in their own image. In their minds, Jesus is wasting the goodness and righteousness of God on the sinners with whom he chooses to associate. He is sinning by lavishing his attention and care in God's holy Name, on people whom he should be labeling sinners, but whom he instead chooses to call simply, 'friend'.

I cannot say that this story teaches us much at all about the sinful behavior of people. The story does, though, tell us all about the behavior of God. Jesus is the extravagant one. And in heaven, says the story, God will welcome home extravagantly this Son of God who shared God's Love extravagantly while he was away.

The physician Janet Campbell continues her story. Waking from the anesthetic. And hearing chimes in the distance, the patient mumbles, "Oh! I must be in heaven." The physician watches as the patient's eyes focus on her. "Oh. I must be wrong," says the patient. "I can't be in heaven. Dr. Campbell is here."

In some form or another, people are wondering what it will be like for them to wake up in heaven. What is heaven like? It is as extravagant as the behavior of God toward you and me. What is heaven like? It is as extravagant as God's goodness toward us, as lavish as God's mercy, as wasteful as God's Love.

So let's make Lent a season of our extravagance. Waste some kind behavior on someone today. Waste some attention tomorrow. Throw away some care this week. Give away an extra smile. And I will do the same. And then let us, you and I, watch and listen for the same from others all around us. And I think we will discover that God is telling us about heaven all the time. I think we will discover that we are already waking up in heaven nearly every day.

And so may Almighty God, whose will it is that we give thanks for all things, and that we cast our cares on God who cares for us, preserve us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, that no clouds of this mortal life may hide from us the light of that love which is immortal and is made manifest to us in Jesus Christ our Lord; who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns One God, now and for ever. Amen.