

Wandering Home: Wandering Feast

Fourth Sunday in Lent

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Texts: Joshua 5.9-12;
Psalm 32;
2 Corinthians 5.16-21;
Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

In the reformed church in which I grew up we celebrated the Lord's Supper four times a year. On the Sunday before we were to receive the sacrament there was a liturgy that was read to prepare us for this very sacred occasion. I honestly don't remember any of the words of that liturgy but I remember the feeling it evoked: serious, solemn. We were called to examination. If there was any sin your life you needed to confess it. If there was a relationship that was broken you needed to fix it. The feeling it evoked in me was actually a little bit of dread in that week coming up to the Lord's Supper.

I know where this ethos around the Lord' Supper comes from. In 1 Corinthians 11 verse 27 Paul writes "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord...(and a little further) For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves." I wonder if Paul knew how those few sentences were going to be rehearsed and repeated and imprinted on the psyche of Christians through the ages if he would have said them in that way; whether he would have said it all. There was a reason Paul wrote such strong words to the church in Corinth. But these verses have been lifted out of that context and taken on a life of their own that has dominated the experience of this table for many through the years.

The season of Lent is full of similarly heavy words: "You are dust and to dust you will return." This is a season of repentance. We use this time of Lent to focus on our responsibility as disciples of Jesus; to examine our

lives and to grow in faithfulness; to become existentially connected to a sense of humility that Gordon spoke to us about so beautifully last week. In the gospel of Luke, in the chapters leading up to the parable we have for today, Jesus has been pushing hard at those themes of responsibility and faithfulness in the kindom¹ of God. In Luke 10 we are given the parable of the good Samaritan. In Luke 11 Jesus gives his teaching about prayer. Luke 12 includes the parable of the faithful and unfaithful slave. Gordon unfolded the teaching from Luke 13 last week that includes the heading “Repent or Perish.” Luke 14 contains those iconic words: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Sit and read Luke 10-14 in one sitting and I guarantee you will share some of that feeling I had on those Sundays before communion as a child when the weight of this sacred calling as followers of Jesus is sitting right there on your chest.

Chapter 15 turns a corner into an entirely different ethos. We get the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the parable before us today known as the Prodigal. I know I have mentioned before when we find ourselves in Luke the help that I received from a book by Paul Borgman entitled *The Way According to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts*. Part of what he talks about is the logic and flow of these teachings of Jesus between chapters 10 and 19. Earlier pieces are revisited in the later teachings. Echoes are picked up and amplified, sometimes qualified. The parable before us today is picking up on some of those earlier pieces I mentioned a moment ago. Luke 12.48 is a great summary: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.”² There is that weight of responsibility.

The parables here in chapter 15 give to us a picture of what it looks like to take that responsibility seriously. It’s like a shepherd who lost a sheep and leaves the 99 to find the one. It’s like a woman who loses a coin and who cleans every square inch of her home to find it again. It’s like a father whose son demands his inheritance and takes off to a distant country and squanders his possessions in dissolute living.

¹ *Kindom* is a purposeful paraphrase of the biblical word *kingdom* based on the word *kin* rather than *king*.

² Paul Borgman, *The Way According to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eedmans Publishing Company, 2006), 178.

We often connect in this vivid story to the experience of the son who was lost or of the brother who stayed behind but I found myself this time staying with the father, with his experience, the weight of his responsibility. What I notice when I stay with him as I hear this story unfold is that he carries the weight of his responsibility not as burden or some disconnected sense of duty. That is how the elder son carries out his sense of responsibility.

However, the weight of his responsibility places him in a position of incredible vulnerability. Because he felt so deeply his connection to this son, his son's decision to take off and break away broke his heart. How do I know this? I don't *know* this. I can *feel* it. He clearly goes out every single day to watch for his son's return. On the day when he sees him coming he breaks into a run to greet him. What we feel in this moment – the ethos of this responsibility is joy – pure unbridled joy! That is the feeling you get when you stay with the father throughout this story.

If you look at this from a human point of view (as we read in 2 Corinthians today) the perspective of the elder son makes perfect sense. I have an inner seven year old in me. This is not fair! I live with a seven year old, I know all about it. It is not fair what happens. He is perfectly understandable.

Let's stay with the father instead. When he experiences his elder son's resistance and resentment, I can feel his vulnerability again. His heart is breaking just a bit as he pleads with his son "don't you know that you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." The next piece he says is the amplification of that earlier teaching about the responsibility we have as followers of Jesus (to those who have much, much will be required): "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."

This is the ethos of our life as followers of Jesus. This is the spirit that should encircle this table. Yes, this is a sacred and holy meal. But it is also a feast of love and a place of celebration. It is the gathering place for us where we can touch and taste and remember the depth of our connections

to God and to one another. This is what the ethos of this table is to be about.

Yes, it reminds us too of Jesus' suffering. There is incredible vulnerability in joining this kingdom as followers of Jesus. When we feel the depth of our connections then we share in each other's suffering. That is what the incarnation is all about. That is what Jesus experienced when he walked with us and experienced death on the cross. That suffering is here. It is the back drop and the context, just as the son's betrayal is the backdrop and the context of the story of the Prodigal. But it's precisely because of that suffering that the joy is so intense. Because you know in your bones and in your heart what was lost, that is when you can celebrate so fully what was found.

What Jesus demonstrates for us in his life and ministry is how to make this feast into a wandering feast. Jesus brought it with him to every table. Anytime someone who had been lost, excluded, shunned, or shamed was found and embraced and given their place at the table.

How about setting your sights on *that* discipline for these next weeks of Lent: be on the lookout for joy. Be the first one to offer embrace, acceptance, the first one to set aside resentment? What if that ethos could imprint itself on our psyche when we come to the table; to receive the sacrament and carry with us from this table back into our world a sense of God's unbridled joy for us and for all those God longs to embrace?

This table is after all a pledge and foretaste of the feast of love of which we shall partake when Christ's kingdom has fully come....so let us receive this Supper in true love mindful of our communion with all the saints.