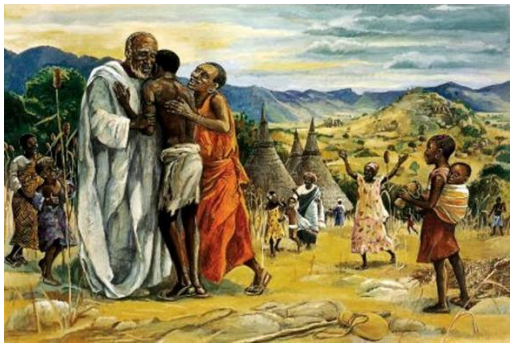

Fourth Sunday in Lent (C) || March 30, 2025 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32|| The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

Divine Justice

Last week when we were together, we had challenging gospel readings that urgently asked that we get busy making at least some part of the world a better place – we had exhortations from Jesus that we should Get To It! Last weekend, I also had the fantastic pleasure of having my DC area family with me – they joined us for church last Sunday and we had the best time together. Big treat for me to spend time with kind, curious and brilliant 8 and 9 year olds! They were rays of sunshine during my Lenten season, and they definitely made my little part of Hull better!

During the visit and without preamble, my niece asked me which of my siblings was my favorite, and which was my least favorite. After making sure that I had heard her correctly, I assured her there were no favorites and then – in what I hoped was a teaching moment - reminded her of what her grandmother would ALWAYS say – that each of her children was her favorite in THEIR age group.

So among the many gifts that this family visit offered is a child's lens on the gospel that I just read, the story of the prodigal son. Upon quick read or listen, it might seem as though the father in the story is showing preferential treatment to his wayward son – creating a celebration, offering him food, wine and the fatted calf upon his return. Even though his older son has made the responsible choices, has continued to work in the fields and support his father, without fanfare or celebration.

How is this fair? and how would it be possible that the father wasn't tipping his hand that he loves the younger, wayward, son the best? After all, this younger son had taken his inheritance from his father and had struck out on his own, apparently not looking back until he was out of money, had squandered everything and was hungry. Instead of demanding

repayment or to be made financially whole, the father "ran to him, kissed and hugged him" welcoming his return home.

If you were the older son, how would you feel? You'd done exactly what was asked of you – and expected of a responsible son, and yet your scofflaw sibling not only took off and didn't' help you with the backbreaking farm work, but he actually took everything that he was going to inherit, spent it on junk, didn't invest or make ANY part of the world any better, and when he could no longer fund his lavish and wasteful lifestyle, he came home – not to the berating that you might expect, he didn't come groveling back – his father saw him from way far away and welcomed him like a celebrity.

What are we to make of this imbalance or injustice at play? Well, since this is a story that Jesus is telling, we should sit up straight and listen carefully because we know we are going to learn some profound truth about God, God's Kingdom or the ways in which Jesus knows and loves the world.

First, let's look carefully at whom Jesus is sharing this challenging story. He is speaking with tax collectors and sinners – much to the disgust of the pharisees and religious folks who are confounded by the company that Jesus keeps.

Second, it is understandable that we might place ourselves in the shoes of the older, responsible son and think about how unfair his father's treatment is, but what if we spent time imagining ourselves as the younger son? The brother who strikes out on his own, presumably to seek his fortune or to explore the world and to find his place in it. Do we think his motivation was to rip his father and family off? Whatever hubris convinced him to take his inheritance early and strike out, his plans have failed miserably. Eventually HE is miserable. Without any money or resources left, he hires himself out to feed pigs in the fields. Here is where it is important for us to understand Jesus' and the gospel writer Luke's audience. To the early Jewish listeners, there would have been nothing more disgusting or foul than feeding pigs. Pigs were abhorred as disease carriers, so we are reminded that this young, wayward son has debased himself in a deeply anti-religious way and would have been the lowliest of the low in his poverty.

As modern listeners, we know that he was not just poor, but we understand that there is a famine and this younger son finds himself starving – hungering to death. At the point of desperation, wanting to live, he hatches a plan to return home and confess and pray for reconciliation

As a final opportunity to experience this gospel story, please put yourself in the father's shoes. He has had his eldest son at home the whole time, and has worked with him, perhaps side by side. Yet we have some clues as to how much he has missed his younger son. We

know that the father spotted his son from way far away, revealing, perhaps how often he was gazing to the horizon in hope. If I were this parent, I too would have been looking out for the son every single day, missing him and hoping for a sign of his whereabouts. Before the younger son could speak, his father throws his arms around him, hugs and kisses him and sends the servants to retrieve jewelry, elegant clothing and shoes and to prepare for a feast for his returned son.

How would that look or seem to any of us? Surely we can understand the joy and relief at a child's return, but where is the part where we, as parents who realize the child is safe, lose our minds about how scared we were, or worried – why hadn't he called or written, we might blurt out in anger. Certainly, few of us would be inclined to then host a feast, right? That wouldn't seem right. A returning child might get a time out or consequences for being so irresponsible. But that is not how divine justice works.

We are invited to imagine that this generous father is God. God, who is constantly on the lookout for us. Does not demand anything from us, and truly celebrates when we repent and return to the Lord.

During this season of Lent, when we are continually trying to identify and eliminate those barriers to our connection to God, let us not squander God's love and our inheritance in ways that eventually find us starving or so thirsty that we will perish unless we return to God. Don't get me wrong, God will be there for us and will delight in our return, but we will have wasted so much. We will have missed out on so much time and God's love in the meantime.

That is the message to the older and responsible son. He has been with God, his father, the whole time. He has been the beneficiary of God's love and presence throughout these years of his brother's absence. God is grateful, delighted and connected to the older son throughout this saga ("everything that is mine, is yours") but God has been sadly absent from the wayward brother's life. The younger son's return and repentance is truly an occasion for God's jubilation and celebration.

We pray as a community, week after week, the assurance that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God. We are the ones who place barriers between us. We are the beings who will prioritize other pursuits that make our experience of God's love and delight harder to feel.

These few remaining Sundays, I hope that each of us will take the invitation offered by our affirmation of the decalogue, to reflect on what might be standing in our way. What might

be the equivalent of squandering our inheritance, or missing out on the sure and certain and immediate knowledge of our belovedness to God.

If you are in a great place about this – terrific! If not, in the next two weeks, I hope that you will supercharge your Lent, so that you too can find yourself fully participating in the triumphs and total heartbreaks of Holy Week.

Let God delight in your presence and may you know God's delight and joy in your existence! Amen+