

Fourth Sunday of Lent: Prodigal welcome

Rev. Barbara Ballenger, March 30, 2025

This Sunday marks the third anniversary of my first Sunday at St Peter's. That means the readings are the same – Paul calling us to be Ambassadors for Christ, Luke's story of the prodigal son.

At the time, I recall feeling a bit lost. I think we all did. I was just starting out as your interim priest in charge. We didn't really know how things were going to turn out. I called myself the Rent to own rector, because you could have turned me back in for a new model at the end of the trial period. There was risk.

And there was welcome. Olive, who was 7 at the time, had been waiting for months for the new priest to arrive, and had vowed to give her a tour when the day finally came. She made good on her offer, the week I arrived. St Paul would call her an ambassador for Christ.

That Thursday Olive, her mom Jenna, and I explored the mystery room, which is also called the sacristy. We found the cool space on the stage behind the curtains. We were disappointed to find out that not all my keys opened all the doors --- good to know. So we peeked into the window of the Godly Play Room downstairs.

And we visited St. Philip-in-the-Fields chapel, where we stood behind the altar and pretended to be priests.

Olive made me a "Welcome" sign in bright rainbow colors. She set it on my desk and advised me to make sure the word Welcome pointed out so people could see it.

Sage advice. And after that tour I was slightly winded, but a little more oriented. I felt a little more at home, a little more found.

I share this story with you because Olive's "can't wait" attitude perfectly illustrates the anticipation that God has to welcome all of us fully into God's life, especially those of us who are feeling lost. For me, I often feel very lost in the face of change, when I am in a new place. Perhaps some of you have felt that way too. We might wonder where God went, or our joy went, or our bearings went. What happened to the world we were used to?

But being lost goes much deeper than that. When Jesus is talking about being lost, I think he's referring to people who feel they are at a fundamental remove from the love of God –maybe because of what people told them about themselves or others, or because of the lies the world told them about what you need to be happy, or because they were harmed in such a way that they can't feel their belovedness. Churches can lose people by failing to welcome, or making someone feel less than human, questioning their dignity.

There are lots of ways to get lost on the winding paths that have been sent before us, especially today.

Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son to explain how God finds those who are lost, and restores them to communities of love. It's the third of three parables that Jesus tells in the 15th chapter of Luke, to address some muttering in the crowd. "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them," some people were saying under their breath. It was coming from the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who should know that a good teacher hears everything, especially muttering.

And so Jesus responded with three parables about what it means for God to long for, look for and welcome back those who are lost. A shepherd loses a sheep. A woman loses a coin. A father loses a son. The stories are all about the joy of finding them.

We have a lot of detail about the story of the Prodigal Son, though. We put a lot of emphasis on the sinfulness of that younger brother, who had the gall to ask his father for his inheritance early and then squandered it on loose living. But frankly that father should have known better. There is biblical advice about not giving your inheritance away before you die (see Sir [33.19–23](#)). That's foolish, even wasteful. We could call this story the Parable of the Prodigal Father. Because prodigal means overabundant to the point of being wasteful. That father had squandered his wealth on a child who would not likely pay him back. Like father like son, you might say. His generosity was prodigious.

So the father wasted his property, and then he wasted his mercy, waiting for that kid to come home. That's how it looked to the oldest son, who was obedient, and dutiful and resentful of his father. Much like those Pharisees and teachers who were grumbling under their breath. In fact, I think they're meant to be one and the same.

In a way that older brother was quite lost too. Lost in his judgements and his righteous indignation. Here this older brother had no shortage of fields, and servants and inheritance left to him. But as he saw it, he had worked like a slave for his father, been obedient, followed the commandments. And for that he deserved something in return. At least a fatted calf.

Both brothers made the same mistake. They thought their father's love was something they should earn, something they got in exchange for their labor, or for following the commandments, or in response to an apology. Their father's overly gracious attitude, that "all that he has is theirs", was lost on them.

That father was welcoming his sons into something new. Jesus is saying to those Pharisees and teachers, you are lost too. And what my Prodigal Father is doing is inviting the ones who think they are righteous and the ones who think they are sinners into a new relationship not only with the Father, but with each other. Because until that happens, God's joy is not complete.

There is a two-part process to the finding, being returned to community and inviting that community to love people to a place of joy, and generosity. The community itself is also transformed in God's act of finding and restoring.

Olive's joy at offering welcome reminds me of the anticipation and the delight that God has in welcoming us into what he desires for all of us, into what comes next – the beloved community.

Anticipation is often considered a quality of Advent, but I think it's a quality of Lent as well. Because Easter beckons from the other side of these 40 days. It can't wait to rejoice with those who arrive, welcome them give them the tour of the new life that awaits.

In Lent, our prodigal God puts out the welcome sign with the glittery words pointing out for all to see. To ambassadors for Christ means that we are that welcome sign. At Easter God welcomes the lost with open arms. We are those arms. And that means all of us are a little more found in the glorious love of God. Amen.