

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Rev. Barbara Ballenger

March 27, 2022

Olive, who is 7, had been waiting for months for the new priest to arrive. When Rev. Emily left in December, she explained to Olive that God had already called our new priest, “we just don't know who it is yet”, to which Olive replied, “well then, can you just ask God who it is, so it happens quicker?” Olive also said that she'll help the new priest, show her around, give her a tour of the church, and tell her all about St. Peter's. Paul would have called her an ambassador for Christ.

And Olive had been waiting with some anticipation. I love that she just assumed that the new priest would be a “she”. And when she heard that the new priest, me, was on the way, she began to ask her mom when she could give that tour she promised. And so she did on Thursday. Olive showed me around a place that is still very new to me. She welcomed me when I was feeling a little lost. Her enthusiasm was prodigious.

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 open all the doors --- good to know. So we peeked into the window of the Godly Play Room downstairs.

And we visited my favorite room so far, the little St. Philip-in-the-Fields chapel, where we stood behind the altar and pretended to be priests.

I asked Olive what advice she might give me as the priest in charge. She told me to write down what doors my keys open so I wouldn't forget. To be willing to play with kids “during the Easter Egg Hunt and any other holiday activities.” And she suggested that I make sure to use the sign that she gave me – the one that says “Welcome” 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.

And on a larger scale the effects of these years of COVID and political turmoil and global unrest have often made me feel quite lost, even in the middle of familiar things. 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?

Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son to explain how God restores those who are lost. It's the third of three parables that Jesus tells in the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 Sirach [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 a bit 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.

And that is one where we don't earn God's love by what we do, but where we receive it as undeserved gift and are transformed by that love into generous givers. That's what it means to be found by God. That's what we are welcomed in to.

Now I'm sure that most of you are not as lost as I am when it comes to finding your way around this place. You probably knew where the bathroom was long before I did, for example. But for all of us, me as your new priest-in-charge and you as a congregation emerging from two years of COVID-related practices, we are all in something of a new place. That might feel a bit disorienting. We all might feel rather lost in some ways.

And so I want to return to Olive's joy, to remind us of the anticipation and the delight that God has in welcoming us into what he desires for all of us, into what comes next. So this year we'll be unlocking all the doors, and exploring familiar places with new eyes. We'll be examining the gifts that have long been nurtured and developed here, and the new ones that God might be showering us with. We'll be considering the new ways that God might invite us to put them to use. And I am thrilled to discover those things with you.

We're using threshold words to describe this year of finding and discerning and celebrating. This year, I am your "interim priest in charge," which means that I'm

going to foster an environment where we can go about this work prayerfully and thoughtfully and relationally. I'm going to invite you to show me around and tell me who you are and where you see God working in your life and in the life of St. Peter's. St Peter's has a team that will be collecting your insights into a parish profile, forming a picture of who St. Peter's is and what God is calling the community of faith to become.

And once we're done with this year, we'll decide together whether I will be your rector, walking with you into the new thing that God is doing through the St. Peter's community.

I can't tell you everything that this will involve – what God will help us to find and what God may invite us to lose. Because God hasn't told us what it is yet. I simply trust in the God that Jesus describes today – one who wants only to pour grace and gift upon us, one who can't wait for us to become all God has created us to be. One who puts out a sign of welcome and makes sure the words are pointing out for all to see.

And if that sounds like good news to you, let the church say Amen.