

Fourth Weekend in Lent (C/RCL): "The Prodigal Father"
2 Corinthians 5: 16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
March 30-31, 2019
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Victoria Ruvolo, aged 59, died this past Monday in Ronkokoma, NY. Her obituary took up a third of a page in the New York Times. It wasn't the standard small photo and tiny font you'd expect. Victoria was remembered in a feature article, and not because of her 30 year career in Nassau County's collection agency. Not even because she'd made the news in November of 2004 when a teenager intentionally threw a 20 pound frozen turkey out the window of a car. The frozen bird crashed through the windshield of the car she was driving, crushing cheek and jaw bones, fracturing the socket of her left eye, collapsing her esophagus and causing brain damage. No, the reason Victoria is remembered so prominently isn't the circumstances or extent of her injuries, but the mercy she extended to the one responsible for them.

Suffolk County prosecutors were pushing for a 25 year prison sentence for the offending teen. But Victoria spoke against the length and harshness of that proposed sentence. "I didn't want [him] to rot in jail," she explained later.¹ She feared that staying in prison that long would ensure that the teen became a career criminal. In her victim impact statement at his sentencing hearing less than a year after the incident, following a monthlong hospitalization, multiple reconstructive surgeries and in the midst of ongoing brain rehabilitation, she spoke directly to the young man: "There is no room for vengeance in my life. I know you are remorseful."²

A reporter interviewed one of Victoria's sisters, Jo-Marie, over the phone last week. She said the family wasn't really surprised by the mercy Victoria had shown. "Not all of us would be that way, but if you knew her, that's how she was... She had a very special soul."³

That kind of news-worthy compassion, outsized mercy, is at the heart of today's Gospel, often called the parable of the prodigal son, sometimes called the parable of the **lost** son, yoking it to stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin, also found in chapter 15 of St. Luke's Gospel. It's a **familiar** story to many of us, but we shouldn't let that blunt how **scandalous** it also is. **Whose behavior do you think is most scandalous in the story??**

- The son who prematurely asks for his inheritance, essentially telling his father, "I wish you were dead, but since you're not, give me now what would've been mine once you **do** kick the bucket"?
- The older brother who sulks at his brother's return and boycotts the party, feeling far superior to his brother and downright ill-used by his father?
- Or how 'bout the father himself?

What the younger brother did was unspeakably awful. Even **more** terrible in that time, place, culture than it would be in ours. Apparently it would have merited a public disowning ceremony, and resulted in an Amish-like shunning. We may kiddingly quote Italian relatives announcing, "You are dead to me!" over some perceived slight, but a *kesassa* ceremony announced just that. It involved the breaking of a pot, the burning of corn, bean, raisins.... There was no going back home after that.

But the father welcomed the disrespectful, unloving, money-grubbing, wayward son back with open arms. He didn't begrudgingly open the door to his returning son – he'd run out to welcome him home! He'd hugged him, not hit him. The father hadn't emotionally buried the son -- he'd kept him very much alive in his heart and had been scanning the horizon for him all along, every day.

The neighbors wouldn't have understood it any more than the older son did. Because of the unthinkable-ness of the son's demand for his inheritance while his father still lived, the father's welcome wasn't just **unexpected**, like the compassion and mercy that Victoria Ruvolo

showed. It was **scandalous**. “[T]his brother of yours was dead and has come to life....” (Luke 15:32b) Only according to the father. In everyone else’s eyes, the guy was still dead as a doornail.

It’s pretty clear **this story is much more about the father’s mercy than the son’s repentance**. The young guy’s repeating his opening lines to himself as he enters the old neighborhood – how deeply felt is his remorse if he has to rehearse his lines?? This story also helps us understand sin as the savaging of a relationship and not just the breaking of a rule. Not that we’re scofflaws, but I think most of us feel worse about breaking someone’s heart than simply breaking the law. Imagine that Someone is God: not a disembodied abstract spirit but a loving Parent in Heaven, who loves us beyond words. (What’s the old song? “His eye is on the sparrow, His eye is on me”?)

Henri Nouwen wrote in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*:

It is precisely the immensity of the divine love that is the source of the divine suffering. God, creator of heaven and earth, has chosen to be, first and foremost, a Father.⁴

Years ago Bishop Roy Reilly was preaching to a group of pastors at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham and said this:

“You and I show up at the banquet looking for our place, and God shows up looking for the missing.”

‘Makes me think of the father scanning the horizon for the return of the missing child – even the child who has **chosen** to leave. ‘Makes me think of my Dad, Lee, who, toward the end of his life, would look down the length of the family dinner table and, both puzzled and sad, would ask, “But where is Sharon?” (Sharon is my oldest sister who had died over 30 years earlier.) We’d think, “Poor Dad, he’s obviously confused.” But now I see that his mind expressed what we all know is true: there **is** an empty seat at the table and it belongs to someone dear. The family dinner table

won't be complete again until we're all seated together once more. It will be a Table in Heaven and not on earth, though.

Victoria Ruvolo's sister said, "She had a very special soul." The forgiveness, mercy, compassion she offered the teen who threw a turkey out a window and changed the rest of her life are a reflection of the forgiveness, mercy, compassion she and we have received from our Father in heaven. At the sentencing hearing 2 months after his guilty plea, the teen said to Ms. Ruvolo:

"Your ability to forgive has had a profound effect on me. It has already made a positive change in my life."⁵

Was he sincere at the time? Or was that a calculated expression of remorse, like the prodigal son's rehearsed lines, another bid for leniency? We can't read the human heart. Who knows? But what we **do** know is that almost 15 years later, someone who knows the offender reports:

"... [he] has a job and is a productive member of society... He did everything Victoria challenged him to do and spoke to kids about the mistakes he made. That's her legacy: She's an example of forgiveness in a vengeful world."⁶

Our holy vocation, our divine calling, is to be merciful as our Father in Heaven is merciful. It is His law we have broken, but most importantly, His heart we have broken. And He embraces us anyway. Nouwen says, "The return to the Father is ultimately the challenge to become like the Father."⁷ Life gives us many chances to practice forgiveness. By God's grace, we, too, can be examples of forgiveness in a vengeful world. Amen

¹Richard Sandomir, "Victoria Ruvolo, 59, Hailed for Forgiving the Teenager Who Attacked Her, Is Dead," *NY Times*, March 29, 2019, A25.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (NY: Doubleday, 1992), p. 31.

⁵Op.cit., Sandomir.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷Op. cit., Nouwen, p. 123.