

Fourth Weekend in Lent (RCL/C): "Matteo! Matteo!!"
Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32
March 26-27, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Matteo!" I can't do justice to the terror in the woman's voice. "Matteo!! Matteo!!!"

Kristiane and I had turned around to see who was shouting when we saw her running in our direction. We were in a throng of tourists headed to the entrance of the Castle Sforza in Milan this past Sunday. The woman was way behind us, near the street and a fountain the Milanese call "the wedding cake." She was racing our way at warp speed, the note of panic increasing each time she cried out what we assumed to be her son's name. You're in a crowded city, near a busy road, in a mass of people, and you've lost sight of your little one. Your heart nearly stops and your blood runs cold. Adrenalin fuels your quest to find your child, the only thing that matters in all the world.

Even if I **weren't** aware I'd be preaching on this Gospel when I got back home, how could I **not** have thought of the parable of the prodigal son? Maybe the most beautiful of all the stories Jesus told.... Maybe the best word picture we have of how much our Father in Heaven, our divine Parent, loves us. True, we have the Gospel in miniature, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that God sent the only Son, so that those who believe in Him may not perish but may have everlasting life." But, for me at least, a story is more powerful than a statement. Like a picture, a story tells a thousand words. I can airlift myself into this story, I can imagine being either son, I can marvel at the parent who forgives so fully and loves so unconditionally and celebrates so wholeheartedly.

This is actually one of three "lost and found" stories in this magnificent fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. You may have noticed today's Gospel skips from verse 3 to verse 11. Missing

are the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The good shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to find the 1 who's gone missing. The owner of the runaway coin tears her house apart looking for it till it's found. The father in today's story is a little different because he doesn't run after the missing son in anguish like the woman at the Castle Sforza last week. He doesn't hunt for him like the good shepherd who's lost his lamb or the woman who's lost her money.

Maybe this is because his son has made a conscious decision to part from his father. He's not like an unknowing lamb who nibbles itself lost. He's not like an inanimate coin that can't choose whether or not it falls and rolls under and behind the furniture. He intentionally chooses to insult, to wound his father by essentially saying, "I wish you were dead so I could get my inheritance, but since you're not, give it to me now anyway." We come from a different culture so we can't really understand how unthinkable bad that behavior was, how shameful, even more so than blowing all the money on partying and prostitutes, even more so than a Jewish boy working as a hired hand on a pig farm. His demand for his inheritance before his father died was a knife in his father's heart. "I wish you were dead, but since you're not, let's pretend you are."

So before we get too judgmental about the older brother's judgment of the father's forgiveness of his ne'er-do-well younger sibling, let's accept that in that place and at that time what the younger guy did was unforgivable. It was to be expected that as he receded in the distance with his inheritance, the father was within his rights to shout after him, "You are dead to me!" And the older brother could yell, "And to me, too!" Culturally, there would be no climbing back from that fall from grace.

"Glimpses into the heart of God" is how one Bible scholar describes the action of the father in this story, and of the good shepherd and the owner of the coin in the other stories.¹ No one who is missing is dispensable. It's like, if you're missing, count on your face showing up on a heavenly

milk carton. Count on Heaven sending out Amber Alerts or Silver Alerts until you are found and come home. 24 years ago Bishop Roy Riley put it this way, so beautifully I remember it still: “You and I show up at the banquet looking for our place, and God shows up looking to see who is missing.”² You and I are scanning the table of place cards to see where we’ll be seated (praying it’s with someone we know), while Jesus is scanning the guest list to be sure everyone is present. If not: off He goes, hunting for them!

I can’t tell you how many times someone has told me (seems like it’s often at a funeral home), “Pastor Mary, I’d come to worship but the roof would cave in!” Usually I just smile or say, “Hasn’t happened yet!” Then I wonder if that’s a lame excuse they tell themselves or if they really believe it. If they truly think they’re unfit, how wrong they are! What a sad misconception! “Matteo!!” The Lord is shouting their name like that mother in Milan, or anxiously scanning the horizon for their return like the father of the prodigal son.

While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20b-c)

“Repent” means to **turn** away from sin, to **return** to God. As soon as the son came into sight, the father ran to greet him. The son hadn’t yet spoken the rehearsed words of apology, the practiced plea for mercy, before the father caught him up in his arms. Unconditional love, full forgiveness that includes forgetfulness of the injury, joyous homecoming, not as the black sheep, not as the family disgrace, but as the lost-and-found, once-dead-but-now alive beloved child.

And that tender mercy isn’t just for the son who has reappeared; it’s also for the son who never went anywhere and feels deadly resentment toward the father for the welcome offered to his deadbeat brother – not to mention for the fatted calf killed for the Welcome Home BBQ. The father is not **so** overcome with joy at his younger son’s **presence** that he doesn’t notice the **absence** of his elder son. He:

came out and began to plead with him... "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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." (Luke 15:28b, 31-32)

We've **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we've **all** received God's merciful forgiveness, and we're **all** called to join in the celebration!

"Matteo! Matteo!! Matteo!!!" The mother's panicked voice was now a shriek. Then another voice: "Matteo!!" A woman whom I assume didn't even know the distraught mother began to call the child's name. The mother sailed past us, through the entrance of the castle. I was debating if I should start calling the child's name, too, but wondered if he came to me how I'd connect him with the mother who had now disappeared. Then like little fish swimming against the stream, out came mother and little Matteo, now captured in her arms, receiving a cross between a bone-crushing hug and a reprimand!

I wished I had called out Matteo's name in a similar spontaneous act of maternal solidarity. That stranger got it: our makeshift community's only purpose in that moment was to find the missing child and reunite him with his mother. So many things are so clear in retrospect!

We have an obligation to one another, too, in everyday ways closer to home, to seek the lost till they're found, to let folks know there is a place for them in God's house and in God's heart and in this faith family. **Everyone belongs.** There is no one to whom we would dare say, "You do not belong." Because there is no one to whom **God** says, "You do not belong." Instead, our God, *"filled with compassion, runs and puts his arms around us and kisses us"* even when we show up as little specks on the horizon.

In his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 5:18-20) Paul says that God:

...has given us the ministry of reconciliation... entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ....

That means we make it our life mission to let people, all people, know how much God loves them. We proclaim the goodness of God (with words, if necessary, as St. Francis would say); we show forth the goodness of God; we make it known that God seeks out the lost till they are found, and then welcomes them with Heaven's embrace.

Pastor Mark & I just watched again "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" on Netflix, and there was a scene I hadn't remembered but really love. Juliet, the young author, finds her grumpy, judgmental, holier-than-thou landlady rifling through her notes. The landlady then waves around a Bible and badmouths Juliet's friends as ungodly. Juliet grabs the Bible from her and brandishes it, basically saying, "This is a book all about love and you have made it all about hate. You use it to judge and exclude!" May we never be guilty of that. May we always draw the circle wide to include and never shrink it to exclude. May we remember that we cannot truly celebrate God's mercy to us if we don't extend that mercy to others. Matteo, welcome back to your mother's arms. Child of God, welcome back to God's arms! Amen

¹David L. Tiede, *Luke* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), 275.

²The Rev. E. Roy Riley, sermon preached on the 45th anniversary of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, New Milford, September 13, 1998 (Pentecost 15C, Luke 15:1-10).

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