

Yr. C, Lent 4
March 31, 2019
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1340 Words

Lessons: Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The worst of the unworthy leaned in close to hear what the teacher would say next. Tax collectors and sinners were always clinging to every word Jesus said. Meanwhile, the men with their reputations intact stood back and shook their heads. “What a bunch of losers!” they said.

The rabbi was talking about losing...*again*. A lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son. Have you ever noticed how much our Lord talks about losing? In the preceding chapter of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of the risks of losing—our possessions, our families, and even our lives—if we follow him.

The losers lean in, close enough to feel his breath...close enough to catch every word. The winners, they stand back and remain safely above it all. We know it’s true—It’s much easier to judge, than to be judged. It’s much better to stand back at a safe distance than to lean in and mingle with losers.

Last Sunday night I became a loser. For an hour and a half my name was Eunice, and I was on a fixed income. Along with about 50 adults and youth from St. Peter’s and St. Giles, I participated in a poverty simulation led by Beth Templeton. It is a way for kinesthetic learners to glimpse the extraordinary challenges of life endured by people who are poor. I highly recommend it to anyone who is a winner—economically speaking.

Beth is quick to say, “This is *not a game*. It is a simulation...of real peoples’ lives.” There are no winners...only learners. Those who participate lean in to experience the uncomfortable reality which the *majority* of our neighbors—locally and globally—confront daily.

With social security of \$733 I could only afford rent of \$244, but the market says rent should be twice as much. So, I had to choose between food and medicine and transportation. I had a TV worth \$100, but the pawn shop said it was only worth \$10. God bless Jackson, one of our youth. He gave me money to buy groceries when I had no other choices. He scarcely had more than I.

This morning, our Lord tells us a similar story about losing. If you have lost enough to be willing to lean in close...feel his breath, and catch every word; then you will learn of how a father lost his son and how a son lost his life. On the other hand, if you feel confident enough and strong enough to stand back and remain safely above it all, you will only hear scattered notes about people who should have known better or tried harder.

It feels like we are deep into a losing season at the moment. My gauge is the sum total and the gravity of your prayer requests. We are grappling with the kinds of losses that Jesus talked so much about in the Gospel according to St. Luke—lost possessions, lost family members, lost freedom, lost health, lost lives. Many have lost enough to be willing to lean in close enough to feel our Lord’s breath—*his Spirit*—and to catch every word.

So, what *is* the Word of the Lord to losers? What is the Word of the Lord at funerals? What is the Word of the Lord beside all the hospice and hospital beds? What is the Word of the Lord to the broken and the broken-hearted...to the poor and the lonely...to the homeless and the homebound...to all the people who are pushed down or brushed aside?

I believe the Word of the Lord is this: In God’s eyes, we...are...*not*...lost. No matter what we think or how we feel, in God’s eyes, we are not lost. I want to pluralize and contemporize for you the Word of the Lord from this beautiful story so you can hear it anew.

“While *we* are still far off, our Father sees us and is filled with compassion; he *runs* and puts his arms around us and kisses us.”

When we are *able* to recognize ourselves as losers, we are *also* able to say, “I have sinned. I am not worthy.”

To which our Father responds and says, “Quickly, bring out a robe—*the best one*—and put it on my beloved child. Put the family heirloom ring on her finger. Put shoes on his feet. Get the best fatted calf onto the grill. It is time to celebrate! You, my child, are *not* dead. You are alive! You, my child, are *not* lost. You are found. You are *home*!

If we feel confident enough and strong enough to stand back and remain safely above it all, we are in danger of being left out—not *kept out*, but left out of God’s Kingdom of *unworthy* souls. When we insist on standing back at a safe distance (like the older brother), we will only hear scattered notes of music and dancing...and it will be infuriating.

The Good News of today’s Gospel is that we are *all* invited to keep the feast—the losers and the winners; the weak and the strong; the humbled and the proud. But we must be willing to lean in close with our brothers and sisters...close enough to hear the invitational Word of the Lord...close enough to feel his breath—his *Spirit*.

He is saying, “You—my child—are not lost. You are found. You are home!”

In his 2nd Letter to the Corinthians who drove him crazy, St. Paul wrote, “...we have been given the ministry of reconciliation...” (i.e. a ministry of forgiveness, mercy, and love.) Paul put a finer point on it with this: “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself.”

In the 1960’s a man named Clarence Jordan from Southwest Georgia set out on an ambitious project. He was a farmer *and* a New Testament Greek Scholar. He contextualized the New Testament for the uncivil righted South. So, the tension between ancient Jews and Gentiles became the tension between whites and blacks. Baby Jesus was born in rural Georgia and laid in an apple crate because the hospital had no rooms available. You get the idea.

I love how Clarence Jordan translated this passage from 2nd Corinthians about God, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Here is the graphic way Jordan depicted this lofty theological concept from Paul. (Quote) “God was in Jesus, *hugging the world to himself*.”

So, I guess our familiar song is completely inadequate. He doesn’t have the whole world in his *hands*, he’s got it in his arms! Hugging the world close...close enough to feel his breath...his Spirit.

He’s got the little bitty baby *in his arms*. He’s got the red and yellow, black and white children *in his arms*. He’s got the sinners and the tax collectors in his arms. He’s got our prodigal brothers and sisters in his arms. He’s got the people we don’t like in his arms. He’s also got *all the people we love* in his arms. He’s got you and me—sisters and brothers—in his arms.

On this 4th Sunday in Lent, we are a little more than half way to Easter. We are also deep into the season of losing. With all that we have to lose—and God knows we have a lot to lose—with all that we have to lose, make sure you sure you don’t fail to *give up* enough of your confidence and your strength in order to lean in close and be embraced by the forgiveness, mercy, and love of God. For goodness’ sake, lean in *close enough* to be hugged along with all the other unworthy souls.

When we lean in close enough to hear the invitational Word of the Lord, we can even feel his breath, his Spirit. The Spirit of Christ can live in us and we in Him. It is the *same* Spirit that enables us to hear and to share this promise of God: You...are...*not*...lost. You are found. You are home.

It's time to celebrate! Therefore, let us keep the feast.

Amen.