

4 LENT MARCH 14, 2010 CYCLE "C"

THEME: NO STRINGS ATTACHED

READINGS: Josh. 5:9-12, Ps. 32, 2Cor. 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

I bet there isn't anyone here who hasn't been on a trip of some kind. I know some who have been on very extended trips. But isn't it a nice feeling, after a long trip to be coming home? You have that wonderful sense that "this is my home", "this is where I live", "this is where I am loved. Well, today's readings all focus on the "coming home" part of the journey, on the welcome, the warmth, the peace and security of being home.

In our reading from Joshua, we see a transition from the homeless Israelites wandering around in the desert to becoming a nation getting ready to step onto the sacred ground of their new home in Canaan on the other side of the Jordan River. "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt," says the Lord to Joshua, "And so that place is called Gilgal to this day." Jos.5:9. Now for Israel the disgrace of slavery is passed and their new home has been realized. The land flowing with milk and honey has come true. They are finally home.

In our second selection today from 2nd Corinthians, Paul is in Corinth, an important worldly metropolis full of self-indulgence, immorality and false pagan worship. He uses the Greek word *Sarx* to describe their way of living. It means "living in the flesh". Not very flattering, for sure! Paul is describing a way of life. They lived this way. We would do the same by describing someone as a Southerner or a New Yorker, or a Minnesotan or maybe a North Dakotan. Paul's point is this: We Christians should be described as a people "in Christ" we need to feel and be at home there. "So if anyone is in Christ," says Paul, "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!" 2Cor.5:17. We certainly should cry out, thanks be to God, we are that new creation! We are at home here. And you know the very best part? Our God has brought us here through the open arms of his Son Jesus. He has loved, saved, forgiven us with no strings attached.

This brings us to one of the most familiar stories in the Bible, the story of the Prodigal son. It is easy for us to identify with this story, because we possibly see ourselves, maybe not as totally destitute as the Prodigal, but close, perhaps. Who has not taken the journey of the Prodigal in one form or another, or at one time or another in our lives?

The key to this story lies in the first two verses of chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel and in the very last verse.. A very good writer, Luke encompasses this story with the point and lesson of Jesus: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them," (Verse 2) and "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."(Verse 32). Jesus welcomes sinners. Jesus forgives, welcomes home with no strings attached! Aren't

we all wayfaring strangers like the Israelites in need of a home? Or the Corinthian Christians lost in the immorality of the life in Corinth in need of coming home to Christ? Just give us humans a Garden of Eden and we will lose it. Give us a covenant and we will break it. Give us a Savior and we will nail him to a cross.

In this 15th chapter of Luke we have not one but three parables about being lost. There is the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and finally the lost son. It is Jesus who reminds us that the Father is so anxious to have us back home with him that he will do anything to help us come back. He will make the ultimate sacrifice of his own Son to achieve our repentance and return home, forgive us, welcome us, and all this with no strings attached!

Several years ago there was a young woman named December. December's father was a pastor. She got the message early on that pastor's children are supposed to be perfect. December knew she would never be good enough for the people at church. So she began rebelling against her family's and her church's expectations. By her late teens, she was living on the streets. She spent her nights partying, doing drugs, and sleeping with any man who caught her eye. Sometimes she would slip into her parent's church during the service, but she always left before anyone could talk to her. After she became pregnant, December decided to return to her parents. She expected shame and condemnation. Instead December's parents welcomed her back with open arms. This is the way she put it: "The bottom line is that I came back to my family and to God because they love me with no strings attached. They forgave me...I thought I could do something to make them disown me, but I was wrong."

Everyone who is a parent can appreciate the agony of the father in Jesus' story even if your child is still at home. That is why this story has spoken to millions of people throughout the ages. It strikes at the very heart of what it is to be a family. Of course, in Jesus' story you and I are the prodigal. Like sheep, each in our own way have gone astray. At some time in our lives all of us have known what it is to be lost. But whether we have strayed only a few baby steps away from God or whether we have taken our inheritance into a far country, the key is to return, to come home. For our Father will welcome us with open arms and kill the fatted calf for us. His grace is sufficient, his love is everlasting, his forgiveness is endless. There are no strings attached to his "welcome home!" **Amen.**

Pastor Barney