

LENT: IN FAITH WE JOURNEY WITH JESUS

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 18, 2007

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

One Walked Away; One Stayed Behind

This week's reading from Luke's Gospel tells the story of a father and two sons. One son learns the meaning of his father's love when he walks away from it. The other son struggles to understand such extravagant love.

The first part of the story focuses on the son who rebels and demands his share of the inheritance, only to learn, rather quickly, the folly of his decision. His return home is met by a joyous father – one who sees him from afar and runs out to greet him and welcome him home. The son who was lost has now been found (15:32).

In contrast, the elder son – the one who dutifully remained at home – responds to his brother's homecoming with anger and resentment (15:28). In choosing to avoid the celebration, he isolates himself so that he, now, becomes the one who is lost. Yet his father reminds him that he has never been separated from his father's love and that everything the father has is his. According to the Law of Moses, the first-born son is to receive a double portion of the father's property (Deuteronomy 21:17). The story ends without our knowing what the elder son will decide to do.

The story Jesus tells is the third in a series of parables about something being lost and then found. Jesus tells these stories in response to the remarks of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who criticize Jesus for associating with sinners – those who are marginalized by society and regarded as "lost" (15:2). Yet, it is these very lost ones – the tax collectors and sinners – who have come to hear Jesus. They gather around him, eager to listen (15:1). Jesus' opponents – those of high regard by society's standards – come only to judge and criticize.

The behavior of the father in Jesus' parable undoubtedly would have created a furor among the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. The Law was clear on how a rebellious son was to be treated; such behavior mandated death by stoning (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). Yet, the father's act was one of unconditional love, and he rejoiced at his son's return home. The elder son in the parable mirrors the attitude of Jesus' antagonists, those who self-righteously believe they have earned their place in God's kingdom because of their obedience but who, in fact, become lost.

The parable provokes us to examine our own attitudes toward a gracious God who reaches out to seek the “lost” in our society. How will we treat those whom God welcomes? The apostle Paul reminds us that we are “not to judge people by what they seem to be. ... Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person. The past is forgotten, and everything is new” (2 Corinthians 5:16, 17, *CEV*). Through Christ, we are reconciled to God. In the past “we were dead because of our sins, but God loved us so much that he made us alive with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4, 5, *CEV*).

The season of Lent is a time when we are reminded of our need to repent and turn back to God, to “come home.” We, too, are the lost ones whom God seeks. Like the father in the story, God sees us when we are afar and rejoices when we return. God prepares a feast and says, “Welcome home!”

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Nicaragua – With thanks to God for donors who made possible projects bringing comfort, joy and hope to thousands of children working in the streets, teenagers abusing drugs and alcohol, and to the Miskito community, who now have Portions in their own language, and with thanks to God for the forthcoming launch of the Miskito Bible with Deuterocanon; **Costa Rica** – With prayers that immigrants receive, read, and experience the Word and may indigenous groups receive the New Testament joyfully, and with prayers for the translation of the Bible into sign language; **Panama** – With thanks to God that the process of national restoration has already begun, and with prayers that it may continue and conclude in accordance with God’s perfect will.

Activity Corner: “Forgiveness” Prayers

Supplies needed: Bible; 8-1/2” x 11” construction paper (assorted colors); pens or pencils; scissors.

Read together Psalm 32. Consider reading it antiphonally (females reading odd-numbered verses; males reading even-numbered verses). Discuss how one can feel “lost” when separated from God because of sin. Then talk about how forgiveness restores one to a relationship with God. Invite everyone to trace their hand on a sheet of construction paper (folded to measure 5-1/2” x 8-1/2”) with their wrist against the fold. Cut out the hands so that they open up with the fold in the middle. Inside the hands, ask everyone to copy verses 5 and 6a from Psalm 32. Encourage everyone to use their folded “hands” throughout the week as a reminder to pray each day and confess their sins to God. Conclude by singing “Amazing Grace” or one of your favorite hymns about God’s forgiveness and love.