

# Sermons at Christ Church

## The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength

Lent IV

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J.R.R. Tolkien, the famed writer of *The Lord of The Rings* wrote that “Not all who wander are lost.”

But how do you know you are not lost if you do not know where you are going? To come to yourself is to acknowledge that we can be lost, and in fact may be lost. There are times in our lives when we become separated, estranged and disconnected from loved ones, ourselves or from God. We also experience periods of desperately wanting and needing to be found; wanting and needing to know that we are loved and accepted. Coming to yourself then may be the most honest point you may ever reach in your life. For that is the point where you recognize who you are and what you have become. And mainly because you know you do not deserve to share a trough with pigs, you find your way back home to the embrace of the God whose love is wider than the seas and reaches far beyond the heavens.

Thomas Merton wrote this prayer, especially for those who are lost “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me, and I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself. Therefore, I will trust in you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.” Being lost, this is the moment when I came to myself. And like the people of Israel who were about to cross the Jordan into their new land, left all the gods beyond the River Jordan before crossing the river. When we come to ourselves, we acknowledge our sins and reveal our guilt, and then we cross the threshold of God’s mercy leaving behind all the ills of our former lives.

Two brothers who could both lay claim to an inheritance. Two brothers with different personalities; the profligate and the dutiful. A father who is prodigious enough to welcome home the profligate son. And don’t we all experience within ourselves the constant battle between the desire to be measured and the desire to be reckless? Within the context of these personal battles, we come to realize our lack of control

over our own selves and some of the decisions we make. There are times when we win some of these battles, not because we are created other than who we are, but because we recognize deep within ourselves the ultimate value of being reconciled with God. And so for the sake of being made new creatures through Christ, we look more to the mercy of God as being more than sufficient enough to embrace us, even in our guilt than our own claim of being self-sufficient.

There are also times when we lose our way, when pride takes hold of us, maximizing our illusion of ourselves and minimizing the value of others in our lives. But this also is not because we are created other than who we are, or there is some deficiency with us. Rather, we become lost because we look only to ourselves and consider others as means to the end we seek.

The psalmist reminds us of being created and knit together by God, and for that we praise God because we are fearfully and wonderfully made. The reality is that the God who created us has a hold on us, we cannot hide from Him, nor can we escape from His presence. Even at our lowest point, when all things material convince us of an absent, God is still present with us, prodding us to avail ourselves to the blessings of mercy already available to us. The point is, like the son, all we have to do is to avail ourselves to the mercies which is already available to us.

This is the sense of realization that eventually came upon the son who took his inheritance and went abroad thinking that the inheritance by itself will guarantee him the self-sufficiency that he craved.

Although the father could have refused his request, he did not, but gave him what was his due. One of our inheritance is the gift of freedom. God doesn't control how we use our freedom; either for good or for bad, we are to use it the best way we see fit. Some find this latitude a little problematic because they that God controls the inheritance he has given us. But the question is, how then can we be accountable if we have no control over our inheritance? Within the framework of being accountable lies the opportunity to come to ourselves.

The Pharisees and the Scribes who complained about Jesus welcoming sinners understood what it meant to be accountable. They followed the law as a duty, and so didn't consider themselves as sinners. Jesus was therefore justified in welcoming and associating with them. By that same token, they also

wondered why he would welcome and associate with people who were considered outside the bounds of God's mercy.

In his response, Jesus draws two distinctions: one, those who follow the law as a duty- like the older son, and so think that following the law as a duty was the only means to God, and that the duty was sufficient in itself. Two, those who believe in the boundless mercies of God-like the lost son. And for whom nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus, not even their manifold sins.

Jesus questions the false sense that underlies our claim to being dutiful like the older son, and recasts God in the image of a father who welcomes his reckless son, not because the father doesn't care about the recklessness of the son, but that the son's recklessness was not enough to substitute his love for him. More importantly, what mattered was the courage of the son who came to himself and returned home. God's boundless mercy makes it possible for God to welcome those who out of the depth of their sins reach out to be reconciled with Him.

Jesus paints God as one who values the return of one sinner. Just as much as the father honors the freedom of those who go wayward, so does he honor the freedom of those who find their way back home. His hands wide open and stands ready to welcome you. The question is, how manifold are your sins? How deep and broad are they? What prevents you from going back home?

The poor son "came to himself", in other words, he had an epiphany, a self-awareness within which he realized his sense of worth, not as one who has been reckless but as one who could rely on the generosity of his father. As a son, he was worth more than his present status; he was worth more than feeding pigs or eating their food. His offense was more than he or his father could handle, but he thought to himself, I am worth more than this!! It was this kind of self-affirmation, this sense of self-worth that generated the necessary courage to go back home. When all things material point to a man at his lowest ebb, that to me is also the moment where he is at his highest point. For that is the moment when a new sense of self-worth generates the courage that leads us back home.

It is not for lack of awareness that we refuse to be reconciled with God, it is lack of courage-the strength of mind which is able to overcome anything that threatens the attainment of the highest good. Paul Tillich argues that "Courage is self-affirmation "in-spite-of," that is in spite of that which tends to prevent the self from affirming itself." And to me, the self can only affirm itself when it comes to itself and reaches out to be in union with God.

Like the father, God always has his hands open, seeking to be reconciled with us. As heavy as our sins may be, as burdensome as our load maybe, as weary as we may be from running and hiding, God is where we yearn to hide. And so if we want to run, may we run towards Him instead, and let Him welcome us, put a new robe on us and celebrate with us because when we came to ourselves, we had the courage to find our way back home. If He thought we were lost, we have been found because we found our way back into his welcoming arms. It feels good to be home. Amen