

March 27, 2022 | The Fourth Sunday in Lent

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Wilderness Companions: EMBRACING, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor based on Luke 15. 11b-24, the Parable of the Prodigal Son

I believe that you came here today – that you wandered in or sauntered in, reeled in or wheeled in, tuned in or Zoomed in – hoping against hope to meet God. I believe, that some of you arrived with figurative hands on hip daring us to show God to you. I believe others of you are here more out of desperation, pleading: *If there is a God, please, please show me. Prove it. I want to believe; help my unbelief.*

People like you had similar questions, similar desperations, similar doubts and skepticism 2000 years ago when an itinerant preacher, a carpenter by trade, appeared in Palestine. The thing about this preacher, this former carpenter, is this: in his presence, ordinary people experienced God, came to believe in God, saw God and tasted God, experienced God's kindness. In Jesus' presence, God – who is as far from us as the most distant star – became so real and so near to those assembled, that it was as if God was in their own breathing.

Such was the person of Jesus. Jesus transmitted God. He mediated God. Jesus was and is God. And this God – omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent – stood before them: his feet dusty with the road, his hands callused from woodwork, and his heart wide open, tender, and ever so kindly.

Maya Angelou famously wrote: "People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel."

It was because of how Jesus made people feel that time is divided into before and after him. It is because of how Jesus made them feel that a handful of fisherman abandoned their nets, their boats, and their livelihood and set off on an unlikely trek in pursuit of something so lovely and sparkling that it was worth everything to them. It was because of how Jesus made people feel that we are here today: a church, not a club; the body of Christ, not a social service organization; a people called to lead with our hearts, gathered around such matters as love, as forgiveness, as grace.

One of the ways by which Jesus transmitted God, channeled and embodied God, one of the ways by which he rendered an invisible God visible and a distant God near: his stories. In Jesus' stories, and in Jesus' telling of them, an immaterial God became substantial; a fearsome God became tender; a distant God, drew near.

Listen:

Jesus told this parable: There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So the father divided his property between his two sons. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country. There he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent his whole inheritance,

a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he hired himself out to a farmer, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. So hungry was the son that he would gladly have eaten the pigs' food, but no one gave him anything.

One day the younger son came to himself. He thought: 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."'

So he set off to return home to his father. While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; his father ran to greet him and put his arms around him and kissed him. The son confessed saying, "I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son". But the father said to his servants, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

It was in the year 1669 that Rembrandt painted perhaps his most extraordinary work, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. It's there, in your bulletins, in an insert and posted on line.

The painting depicts the younger son having returned home in a wretched state from travels in which he has wasted his inheritance and fallen into poverty and despair. Let us be clear: the younger son has been selfish, wanton, and destructive; his behaviors depraved and immoral. Having hit rock bottom and with nowhere else to turn, he hobbles home, defeated, humiliated, a wreck. He kneels before his father in repentance, pining to be allowed in, never expecting to be forgiven. Yet, in this story by Jesus (a story, mind you, about God) the father receives the son with paternal warmth, welcomes him unreservedly, and, here's the kicker: forgives him absolutely.

Historian Kenneth Clark claims that Rembrandt's painting of this scene is the greatest picture ever painted.

Art historian H. W. Janson writes it "may be [Rembrandt's] most moving painting. It is also his quietest—a moment stretching into eternity. So pervasive is the mood of tender silence that the viewer feels a kinship with this group."

Rembrandt scholar Rosenberg calls the painting "monumental" writing: "it interprets the Christian idea of mercy with extraordinary solemnity, as though this were his spiritual testament to the world. It represents a symbol of homecoming, of the darkness of human existence illuminated by tenderness, of weary and sinful humankind taking refuge in the shelter of God's mercy."

People will remember how you made them feel. This painting, this story, depicts is how it feels to be human and faulty, yet forgiven, loved, and welcomed. It was Jesus' spiritual genius to impart to his hearers what it feels like to be in the presence of our munificent God: what it feels like to be forgiven, though we are sinners and imperfect and full of mistakes; how it feels to be loved, though we are too often unlovely and unloving; what it is to be offered eternal life,

though we are mortal: prey to sickness, old age, and death; what it feels like to be rescued, though it is we, who got ourselves into trouble.

The year Rembrandt completed this painting, 1669, was also the year that Blaise Pascal's *Pensees* was posthumously published. In this remarkable work of religious imagination and daring theological genius, Pascal argues for an experience of God discovered through the heart rather than through reason.

As it happens, 1669 was also the year that this church's founders (twenty eight families) broke away from Boston's First Church in an effort to be faithful to the very God to whom we are introduced by Jesus: a kindly God, intimate and affectionate, as tender and forgiving as the Prodigal Son's father; as generous with grace and hospitality.

In this parable we – you and me – are both of the sons. We are the dutiful elder son (Why, of course you are. Look at you! You're in church after all!) At the same time, we are the selfish, wasteful, dissolute younger son. (Just look what we have done, are doing, to God's creation; the endangered manatee, Antarctica's Conger Ice Shelf collapsed this month; Australia's Great Barrier Reef suffering its sixth mass bleaching.)

We are, each of us, both: the dutiful elder son and the selfish, wanton younger son.

But the story isn't about us. The story isn't about the sons. The story is about God, depicted here as a father who pines for the one lost sheep out of a hundred; who searches high and searches low for the single lost coin; who, though he has by his side his dutiful oldest son, yet longs for the return of the younger son. And, upon catching sight of him in the far distance... doesn't ask questions or scold...but rushes out to greet him, draws the son into a warm embrace, lays out a feast, and outfits this son in clothing fit for a prince.

You – and you, and you, and you – we are accustomed to finding a catch in every promise; to looking for the fine print, the exclusions. But Jesus' stories of extravagant grace have no exclusions, no catch, no loophole disqualifying us from God's love. There are no questions or recriminations forthcoming from God. It's just grace: pure, unfiltered grace. Grace that is absolute, undeserved, free and copious. So much grace as to take one's breath away. It is ours for the asking.

I believe, that you came here today – that you wandered in or sauntered in, reeled in or wheeled in, tuned in or Zoomed in – hoping against hope to meet God. Aching to be convinced that God is real, and is as near to you as your own breathing.

The church's proof is in the stories told by a long ago itinerant preacher; a preacher in whose presence, ordinary people experienced God, came to believe in God, saw God and tasted God: a God in whose presence the lost felt and experienced what it is to have been found; and the sinner felt and knew himself to be forgiven, and offered a fresh start, a do-over, with the past erased. A God in whose tender presence the lonely and forlorn felt companioned; and the

enslaved one came to know in her bones that her miseries, her desperation, her agonies were understood in heaven.

This kindly God – the God to whom Jesus introduces us – was, 2000 years ago, was in 1669, and is still today, a revelation. It is why we are so insistent that the God to whom Jesus points is more mercy than judgment; more forgiveness than accusation. It's why we say: We are a guilt-free church! Well, unless you do something really bad. But if you do, if you do fall and fail – and whom among us has not? – you can always come home. The door is open, there is place for you at the table. Forgiveness is yours for the asking. We have it on good authority: on the authority of Jesus.

Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*

