**St Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**Joshua 5:9-12**

[**Psalm**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Lent/CLent1_RCL.html#nt1) **32**

**2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

[**Luke**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Lent/CLent1_RCL.html#ps1) **15: 1-3,11b-32**

Where The Heart Is

If you have read J. R. R. Tolkien’s epic masterwork, The Lord of the Rings,[[1]](#footnote-1) you will be well acquainted with the life and likes of Bilbo Baggins, a fine and humble Hobbit, who suddenly finds himself pulled away from his comfy, somewhat benign and predictable slipper kind of life at home, into adventures he could never have imagined, let along encounter as he was destined to do. The four books which tell of these adventures taking place in a mythical middle earth, are filled with the kind of theology you and I work to understand. The lessons learned in Middle Earth, enjoyed by young and old alike, around the world, are not far removed from the lessons brought to us through the parables of Jesus. Stories of good prevailing over evil, of unknowing and trust, of humble and contrite hearts, of forgiveness and grace.

What springs immediately to mind when thinking about the Hobbits, is a reminder of their innate generosity. If you have read the books, you will remember that, rather than wait for someone to hold a birthday party in one’s honor, the Hobbit arranges for a birthday party for his family and friends… giving thanks for their presence in his life, and indeed, as far as his parents were concerned, for giving him life in the first place. So, the birthday celebration does not seek to bring attention and focus to the birthday of the Hobbit himself, rather that auspicious day is meant to celebrate others through gifts of joyous gratitude.

All this said, it would seem to make sense that the well-known parable we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son, heard today, would be easily understood by Tolkien’s Hobbits, and all others whose hearts reside in a place of humble hospitality and joyous recognition of others.

Jesus tells the story of a wealthy farmer and his two sons. Both are due to inherit a goodly sum from their father after his death. The younger son, however, somehow convinces his father that he should not have to wait for his share of the inheritance, and his father responds by fulfilling his request for what he feels already belongs to him. As we know, off goes the son to quickly spend his share of his father’s hard-earned money, on high living in the world, and, as expected, the money is soon gone, slipping through his foolish hands like sand. And, without a single coin to his name, he finds himself eating pig slop in order to survive. At this, he makes the decision to return to his father, who, at the very least, might give him a paid job, even if the work be at the bottom of the pecking order among the hired help.

Filled with humiliation and shame, he returns home. He practices his speech in order to have the right words to say before being cast out as disowned. He cannot imagine anything but the worst kind of welcome, filled with anger, blame and judgement, so he must not have been looking forward to the conversation about to ensue with dear old Dad. He is first sighted by his father as he walks over the hill overlooking the familiar homestead. His father joyously runs with open arms toward his younger son, his heart overflowing with compassion to greet him. It is the most unexpected reception the son could ever have imagined and before he has a chance to spill out his prepared speech, his father kissed him, a fine robe was thrust around him, a ring placed on his finger, a great feast was begun and most of the town was invited. I confess, I cannot stop thinking of a 1960’s MGM production here, starring Spencer Tracy as the father and a young Burt Lancaster as the son! But no matter. For the cast was already set. For the father, it was a very big deal to see his son returned, and indirectly for all those who loved the father and witnessed his joy, was a singular pleasure to revel in it with him.

It would be so comfortable and easy if the story ended on this note. Just as it would have been far more comfortable not to have withstood all the challenges interrupting the happy life of the Hobbit Bilbo Baggins. But life most usually isn’t that smooth and the endings, while sometimes quite happy, are never really perfect.

There is another brother in the story, for whom none of this over-the-top welcome makes sense. During the entire time his brother has been gone, he has been the faithful, hardworking son, not expecting to use his coming wealth before its time, or in any way other than to continue in his father’s footsteps. For years he has worked hard without any overt appreciation or party thrown in his honor. At this huge celebration at his brother’s return, he is angry. Fed up. He would have most likely preferred to see his brother relegated to the lowest most menial job on the farm, undergoing hardship and humiliation among those who used to pay him respect as a son of the landowner. That, at least, could have given some satisfaction.

Alas, so it is that in the human heart, cold justice too often ignores the human hearts involved and has no idea of the contents held within, and thus count their fate as not worth thinking about. This kind of worldly justice finds no place for forgiveness. At this unexpected and ceremonious welcome, he doesn’t want anything to do with his ne’er-do well younger brother and despite his father’s pleas for him to come to the party to greet his brother, he’ll have none of it.

And here we are. Safely landed back on earth, with our very earthy, human responses. Back from the mythology of extreme generosity that lived in Middle Earth, back from the happy-ever-after fairy tales that seem to stop at the moment of all-ends-well, before too much can go wrong. After all, isn’t that why we call them fairy tales? They are not real. Human hearts that dwell in revenge or resentment are real.

Jesus’ story is very real, and lifts up very real, human relationships and the complications of deep feelings, well-placed and well-intentioned, as well as feelings, while understandable, don’t often get us where we would really like to be. And yet, the parable does not ignore evil, does not belittle God’s way and justice is served, even though in a way we would never have thought possible.

After all, it isn’t hard for us to understand the feelings of the hard-working brother after his responsible work for his father, his admirable behavior and care of his father’s land. And it isn’t too much of a stretch for us to think the younger brother should have to pay at some point. He’s the one who’s been playing at have a good time all these years, thoroughly enjoying himself, and now, instead of having his come-uppance, he’s arrived back home, penniless and with nothing to show for his time away, to yet another party in his honor. Our human hearts get it. Who wouldn’t be royally ticked off, at his brother, and even at his father? How could his father be so blind!

Yet, as St. Paul says, we have to stop thinking about the relationship just described between the two brothers in human terms as he explained, “we regard no one from human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul reminds of that through his own suffering and death, Jesus took the place of the sinner in this story, just as he took the place for all sinners, including you and me, taking on all our iniquities and our turning away from God. Jesus is with us in the midst of all our human mess, which he overcomes, and as professed Christians, we in turn, are adopted into that sinless One so that, even though we understand Jesus in his humanity, feeling, suffering as we do, we also understand and accept his resurrection and return to the Divine. We understand that we are reconciled to God through Christ, and thus we hold the ministry and capability of reconciliation in our hearts. This means, we do not count the trespasses against others, but rather work toward reconciliation as we are reconciled to God, our trespasses forgiven.

In other words, let us begin to think of our relationships with the heart of the Divine. Perhaps one way to think about our approach to all our relationships, regardless of their circumstances or degree of difficulty, or even of their ease and tranquility, is to approach them, as we learn from St. Benedict, with the “ear of our heart.” In other words, with the heart of the Divine. To place our heart where it can meet and be reconciled with the Divine.

It is with the Divine heart that the father greets his younger son, and pleads with his older son, as well.

Human reactions are not the focus of Jesus’ parable. We know the son feels afraid as he approaches his home after spending all his father’s inheritance and we know that his brother is boiling mad when he sees what he perceives to be unfair on the part of his brother’s welcome, and of his own sense of isolation from that welcome.

Rather Jesus focuses on the movement of the Divine in the heart of the father. The father does not react in a very understandable and human way, flailing in anger and blame at the sight of his long-lost and wayward son. Nor does he reprimand the older brother for his very human reaction of anger and bitterness toward his younger brother. He neither defends nor blames, which are very human reactions in a multitude of situations we all come across in our relationships, familial or between friends, at work or with all sorts of groups and institutions in which we are a part.

Rather, we are made witness to the father’s own abundance of joyous love, not just for one, but for many. There is no limit to his love. There is plenty for all. “All that is mine is yours,” exclaims the father when talking to his older son. In other words, there is no less love for you, than for the other. My love is without condition and has no end.

What has happened in the past has no impact on the father’s love. What might happen in the future has no impact on that unending love, either. The father is, you might say, in the moment. His heart is in the moment of the Divine, he is experiencing a moment where the divine heart has taken hold of the human heart to show it the way of the Divine. As Paul put it to the Christians in Corinth, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The past counts for nothing. It has no place in the present moment for the Divine heart. And yet, the past and future, the blame and the warnings, always seems to count for everything in the human heart. It is this inclusion of what has happened in the past, and what the outcome should be that steals away any opportunity for unconditional and overflowing love from our hearts, turning us away from the Way to God’s Kingdom on earth.

Like the Hobbits and their birthday parties for the ones they love, the father is responding to the ones he loves and is ready to lift them up in celebration no matter who they are or what they have done.

Through his parable, Jesus teaches us about God’s love for us. Abounding love, consistent, unconditional love. In our humanity, we get confused about love and put a price on it too quickly. I will love you, if…. I will love you when…. If you loved me you would…. How do I know you love me if you don’t…. I leave it to you to fill in the blanks.

It will take perseverance, practice and deep awareness far beyond Lent for us to recognize our many personal sins of resentment, judgment, as our own pig-troughs continue to fill with envy and complaint. Yet, just as the son was welcomed back with open arms and non-judgmental love, so are we welcomed continually to return to God, no questions asked.

Our human hearts are always waiting for the bad guy to get his or her just deserts and we want the good guy to be vindicated. But for this to happen, war, at any level, must break out. Good must prevail over evil. Evil desires to win at all costs for selfish gain. What starts as a war in the human heart, is in danger of growing to such proportions that it infects the human hearts of others, and resentments, greed and lust for power, casts a fire of hell over all that could be at peace, whether between two human hearts or the nations of the world. .

That said, it is clear we live on the side of a very slippery slope. We were created by God to be in relationship with God; in harmony with one another, and in harmony with God and with all of God’s created beings. It is when we fall out of relationship with God, when we allow our lives to become fragmented, distorted and broken due to the human need to be right, or to win, that we find ourselves lost in a fog of indirection.

God’s deepest desire is for continual renewal of God’s creation and all God’s created beings. Only through God’s people can creation be repaired and restored and we do not have time for human reactions to take final control over the Divine possibility that dwells within us. Perhaps the Hobbits were ahead of their time and could teach us a thing or two about awareness of where our hearts are.

This story has little to do with wayward children and everything to do with the infinite height and depth, width and breadth of God’s limitless compassion and love and divine justice that transcends our ability to fathom it.

For us to gain a foothold to lift us back into the safety of that Divinely held grace, compassion and mercy, we must remember the scope of God’s Divine Heart, always searching, always healing, always forgiving, always bringing the one that was lost, like you and like me, back home.

Here is a prayer, *God Has A Dream,* in his book, *A Vison of Hope For our Time,* written by the late Bishop Desmond Tutu, who was buried on January 1st, of this year, 2022:

“I have a dream, God says. Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God’s family, My family.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

March 27, 2022

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* (George Allen and Unwin (UK), 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 Corinthians 5:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2 Corinthians 5:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Desmond Tutt, *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time (*New York: Doubleday, 2004),19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)