

Proper 19 year C 2013

“There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.”

I remember well the time my father died of cancer. He will have been dead 30 years next year. He died at age 53. What I remember most poignantly happened about two weeks after his death, when the reality of it began to sink in. We, Katharine and I and my mother I think were sitting out on the screened front porch of my mother’s beach house....talking about my father....I finally had the inevitable meltdown....I felt all this anger well up inside me....anger towards God....I was lost in it....I shook my fist at the creaking ceiling fan above me, as if it were some absurdly grotesque symbol of an aloof God, faceless, uncaring....and I literally cursed this God, because this God would answer none of my burning questions about death....why him at age fifty three for God’s sake? A good man. A good father.

The next morning I got up early, guilt stricken, and went to the early service at St. Andrews in Panama City. All the way up until communion I sat and wallowed in my guilt at having so rudely insulted God the night before. The confession and absolution didn’t help. They had just called a new rector who had been there a few months. We had met him just a couple of times. He had the practice of saying the name of the person to whom he was administering the sacrament....If he didn’t know you he would ask your name, and then repeat it with the words of administration. I assumed as I was kneeling and he was making his way down the altar rail with the paten of bread in hand, he would ask my name since we were not regular parishioners....but when he came to me without hesitation he said: “Jim the body of Christ, the bread of Heaven.” He remembered my name, and I felt this wash of forgiveness penetrate my soul. As if God, Godself had spoken my name...There’s a wideness in God’s mercy. I wept all the way back to the house filled with the knowledge of God’s unfailing love for me. I was lost and then found.

A parishioner, let us say currently on sabbatical from the church, came by the office a few weeks ago just to say hello. He told me he was afraid he was losing his faith; that he felt far from God. I told him first that he is not alone, and second, not only will God find you, but your faith will as well; that God has an obsessively compulsively low tolerance for lostness.

Our reading for today in Luke is about finding the lost, Luke being obsessive and compulsive as well. He begins describing Jesus eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors and making quite a celebration of it. To the status quo, these are the lost, and deservingly lost, low-life in short....

the tax collectors working for the treasury of Rome...extortion one of their calling cards...and then sinners which would cover the rest of the least and scorned among us...But Jesus sees that the sinners are lost because they are wounded and sorely burdened by sin and the indignity that sin brings....and he sees the weighty indignity under which the tax collector lives every day... and Jesus can't resist the lost...In this new world order of which Luke speaks, things don't look to God the way they seem to the world...God goes to the lost bearing nurture, dignity, and personhood.... God can't help it; God is drawn to them....the liberation theologians of the twentieth century called our latter day equivalents of sinners and tax collectors, the non persons...and dear friends of God it is to them we are sent. Luke goes on to describe the fervor, the rigor that we as sons and daughters of God must claim in this life of finding the lost of our world, our God-given vocation.

Like the shepherd who leaves the ninety nine sheep to find the one lost sheep...this finding is risky business....and like the woman who sweeps her entire house to find one lost coin...this finding has to be persistent and relentless....Luke will go on later in our reading to tell us of the lost and unrepentant son whose father upon seeing him in the road runs after him because one who was lost is now found, and he kills the fatted calf and puts on a great feast, not because of repentance, but simply because one who was lost is now found. Luke will also tell us of a great banquet to which all the riff raff of the city alleys and byways are invited. He really gets on a roll... God is in our world among us as creator redeemer and sustainer to set free into full personhood the lost...no matter how lost....God is not in the world to condemn and punish...God is in the world to gather all of us, the human community at one table, all as equals, at peace with one another, and celebrate our humanity that we are loved beyond all reckoning....that God's love for us is wider than the sea...Paul tells us that nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And if that is true then we have the joyful obligation to share that wondrous love with the world, beginning with the least and the lost...for God has an obsessively compulsively low tolerance for a world in which there is injustice and violence which divides us and alienates us into lostness. Let us be about finding those lost in degradation and bring them to dignity so that they may know the lavish wideness of God's mercy and love, and the well being God hopes for us all...and let the grand celebration, whose table is already set, begin in earnest.