

Fourth Weekend in Lent (RCL/C): "Scanning the Horizon in Love"
Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
March 29-30, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The story of the prodigal son is filled with unusually rich details and contrasts: dissolute living and pig farms, rings, robes and fatted calves! But the detail that touches my heartstrings the most is the description of the father running, rushing toward his wayward, returning son when he is "still far off" (Luke 15:20). Why does the father even **notice** the son approaching while he's still a good distance away? Because he's been scanning the horizon the whole time he's been gone. Like the wife of a ship's captain who's out to sea, stationed up on the rooftop widow's walk of their Nantucket or Gloucester home, looking through a spy glass to check the horizon for any sign of a ship's mast, hopefully signaling her husband's return to port. Such sorrow in absence, such longing for return, such dread of never seeing the loved one again, such joy in anticipation of glad reunion.

The father with his broken heart speaks to me more than the son with his empty stomach. It's hard for me to take the son's remorse all that seriously, since he's rehearsing his lines on the way back, practicing saying just the right thing to regain entry into his childhood home. The father's love for his son seems more real than the son's for his father. The son will settle for upgrading his diet from pig slop. The father will not settle for anything less than welcoming his son back with open arms and throwing a party to celebrate his return.

The thing is, I unfortunately have a lot more in common with the prodigal son than the merciful father. The gravitational pull of immediate gratification can overwhelm my determination to keep the commandments. Sometimes it's not till the consequences of my

selfish choices come home to bite me that I feel remorse, and then it's more regret for the pain I **feel** than for the pain I **caused** my God or neighbor. And although at times I finally realize deep down that I am in the wrong, I may still deny it to others, and maybe to myself as well. Therein is the problem: we can't really **repent** if we're not willing to take **responsibility** for our less-than-loving actions or inaction.

This is where Psalm 32 (assigned for this weekend) comes in. I've never paid any attention to it before. (With 150 psalms out there, there's always new ground to explore!) It begins with 2 beatitudes, 2 "Blessed are you's," "Happy are you's," "Lucky are you's." Here's the paraphrase from *The Message*:

¹*Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be—
you get a fresh start,
your slate's wiped clean.*
²*Count yourself lucky—
GOD holds nothing against you
and you're holding nothing back from him.*

"...[Y]ou're holding nothing back from him" is the key here. We're being totally honest, not at all dodgy, truly transparent with God about our own awareness of our failures in love. We're not trying to convince ourselves, God or anyone else, that we get it right all the time. We're not making our failures somebody else's fault, not shifting the blame, not making excuses for our appalling judgment or hurtful words, our pathetic actions or apathetic inaction.

I think we'd all agree there's not much in our current culture that encourages self-examination, admission of mistakes, apologies for wrongdoing, asking of forgiveness. If we listen to the news for 5 minutes we'll hear plenty of examples of dodging responsibility, denying liability, outright lying about breaking the law, flaunting the Teflon quality of

charges never sticking, cheering the apparent inability of others to hold us to account. How are our children ever to learn the virtues of honesty, holy regret, and sincere seeking of forgiveness, if they don't see adults **practicing** those virtues? How can society function, how can communities thrive, without truth and trust?

After pointing out the blessings, the benefits of 'fessing up to our "missing the mark" of holiness (the literal meaning of sin), the psalmist describes the cost of **not** acknowledging our guilt, the physical, emotional, spiritual price of staying silent about sin:

³When I kept... all [my guilt] inside, my bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans.

⁴The pressure never let up; all the juices of my life dried up.

"Maybe if I don't say anything, nobody will notice I screwed up" doesn't work when God is involved. Not that God is looking to pounce when we **do** something **wrong** we shouldn't have or when we **don't** do what is **right** that we should have. I don't picture God as Judge Judy; I picture God as the loving father of the prodigal son, sad at how the son has treated him, but even sadder that the son left home and has been long absent – the heartbroken but steadfastly loving parent who scans the horizon for the child's return and races out to greet when the prodigal wakes up and shows up again.

Our silence about our sin, our failure to ask forgiveness, our kidding ourselves and others that there's no reason for remorse has been framed as "a rejection of grace."¹ Silence isn't just dishonesty about our own culpability, it's lack of trust in God's willingness to forgive. Someone has written, "The silence must be broken... Confession is the knocking to which the door opens, the seeking that finds, the asking that receives. Confession of sin **to** God is confession of faith **in** God... Faith is not like the horse and mule without

understanding [spoken of in Ps. 32:9]; faith understands that we are sinners and God is gracious.”²

Psalm 32 (*The Message*) continues:

⁵Then I let it all out; I said, "I'll make a clean breast of my failures to God." Suddenly the pressure was gone - my guilt dissolved, my sin disappeared.

⁶These things add up. Every one of us needs to pray; when all hell breaks loose and the dam bursts we'll be on high ground, untouched.

⁷God's my island hideaway, keeps danger far from the shore, throws garlands of hosannas around my neck.

⁸Let me give you some good advice; I'm looking you in the eye and giving it to you straight:

⁹"Don't be ornery like a horse or mule that needs bit and bridle to stay on track."

¹⁰God-defiers are always in trouble; God-affirmers find themselves loved every time they turn around.

¹¹Celebrate God. Sing together - everyone! All you honest hearts, raise the roof!

The psalmist didn't know about Jesus: but we do. We realize that, as St. Paul wrote in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, “... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting [our] trespasses against [us], and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” (2 Corinthians 5:19) The Good News is that the Father who sent the Son is like the parent of the wayward child who scornfully left home. Our heavenly Parent is ever scanning the horizon for our return, not at-the-ready with a whip to punish but with robe and sandals and ring to welcome. All the Homecoming requires is willingness to recognize we have wandered far from Home and humility to return, asking forgiveness. Once we've done that once or twice or ten times, it becomes easier. When we've asked and received God's forgiveness, we're equipped to invite others. Then we truly become “ambassadors for Christ.” (2 Cor. 5:20a) Amen

¹James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation series, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 147.

²Ibid.

