



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“PRAISE GOD FROM WHOM ALL BLESSINGS FLOW”

Scripture Lessons: Joshua 5:9-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 31, 2019
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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, ‘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 he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “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 and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “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, and 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.

‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: *Thanks be to God.*

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Every now and then you'll hear me say that a particular lesson from the Bible comes to us from the lectionary...and when I say that, what I'm referring to specifically is the Revised Common Lectionary, which is a list of suggested readings that were presented to the church-at-large in more or less its present form some 25 years ago.

The goal of the lectionary, at least in part, is to ensure that the full breadth and scope of the Biblical witness is read and proclaimed with regularity – that nothing significant related to our Biblical heritage is ever left out of the regular reading and proclamation of God's Word. In this way, the Lectionary suggests a number of significant chapters – episodes within God's story of salvation, in what amounts to three, one-year cycles of suggested readings.

Still, it happens that sometimes we run across a very familiar story – like the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact, this story is so familiar that we sort of take it for granted. **We know** well this son who wants his inheritance early. **We know** about how he squandered his fortune with dissolute living and eventually came to his senses while working with pigs in a foreign land. **We know** about the generosity of the father as well as the righteous, indignation of the elder brother.

Listen again to the older brother's appeal: "For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!"

Oh, we know this story and it's a good story – it's a great story. But we've been there and done that! And not unlike the way we treat other things with which we are so intimately familiar, over time we begin to take it for granted. If the truth be known, we take a great deal of life for granted.

Just last week, our family traveled to Washington, D.C. for Spring Break, and one of our favorite memories from that trip was a visit to the Bible Museum. If you ever get the chance to go, I encourage you to take it, because it really is a wonderful museum. One thing I noticed while walking through the halls and touring the various exhibits, was that there was an unmistakable sense of the absolute importance of religious freedom as it relates to our nation from the beginning until now. And we are so fortunate in this way...to be able to stand up as we do every Sunday morning and repeat together the Apostle's Creed without fear or trepidation; yet in any number of places the world over, it puts your life in jeopardy.

Or what of freedom of speech? Granted, I'd be somewhat giddy if some of my friends on social media were prevented from showing out and expressing their political animus toward one person or another; however, if the truth be known, I wouldn't be giddy at all, because that

would be an essential freedom - one that we seldom even think about - gone....oh, we'd miss it then, wouldn't we!

Ah, but we take for granted the small things too. We grab our remote controls and "Wala!" - our favorite television show, or, if you're like me, it's a previously recorded show...even more convenient!

We start our cars without a moment's reflection, and we head out to the pharmacy to pick up our ready-made prescriptions or we go to the grocery store to get fresh foods of virtually any kind...and if we so choose, well, the grocery store can now come to us.

All of these modern day conveniences are par for the proverbial course - they are expected - they are routine, and we hardly pay them any attention at all. We just assume that they will always work - that they will always be around, that is, until they are not!

Many of us have been through a hurricane or two or three living in Charleston. When Hurricane Hugo came through back on September 22, 1989, as a high school student it felt as if we were without power for what seemed like months...and I'm sure that in some parts of Charleston and elsewhere, it was a matter of weeks rather than days. It happened, in the days following Hugo, that our communal consciousness was heightened as to such basic luxuries as light and water and shelter, which, like so many other things in our lives, until they are gone, we never realize just how important they are.

I've been thinking about this topic of late as it relates to my right foot - I sustained an injury a month or so ago and it is taking forever to fully heal. Sadly, as a friend recently suggested, I'm both aging and healing according to schedule.

Or I think about the parents who are with us this morning - I suspect that there have been times when they have been a little put out by their little angels...maybe it's something as simple as homework which is eternally slow to get done.

Or I think of a husband or wife whose spouse loses their job and how they worry about their loved one's self-worth or perhaps their financial freedom or sudden lack thereof.

But, here's the thing...when it comes to my foot, what if I could not walk at all; or what if our children were not capable of doing their homework; or what if our spouse couldn't lose their job, because they are no longer with us?

In light of this week's suggested lectionary readings, I have found myself thinking about the very blessings of God which so generously flow, and how often it is that we fail to see the goodness of God in our lives. The dearest professor that I recall while a student at Princeton Theological Seminary was Dr. Robert Jacks. He taught us in the area of homiletics, which is a fancy way of talking about the study of speech and communication - the art of preaching, for our purposes.

He was the one who taught me that when talking about Jesus it is never correct to say, for example, Jesus(es) mother or Jesus(es) disciples, but rather Jesus' mother and Jesus' disciples.

Dr. Jacks was the one who taught me that the spoken form of the word a.m.e.n is always “Amen”; unless it is sung, in which case it is “Amen.” Unless, of course, it is an African spiritual in which case it is also “Amen.”

I bring him up because the other day, one of my seminary classmates, Daniel Smoak, opened our local ministerial lunch with a prayer in which he referenced Psalm 103. Dr. Jacks would invite us to actually sing that Psalm before every class.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, And all that is within me, bless [God’s] holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all [God’s] benefits.”

Even more-so in hindsight, I am so grateful that, before every class, Dr. Jacks gave us an opportunity to give thanks and praise for God’s blessings, to be mindful of the ways that God has so lavishly bestowed upon us and upon the world the very richness of His grace.

Yet unfortunately, far too often in life, we simply do not pay attention to God’s benefits. In our Old Testament Lesson this morning – in Joshua 5 – we find Israel nearing the end of her 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. And now, as a profound demonstration of the next chapter of their life lived together as a community of faith, their daily supply of manna is replaced by the produce of the Promised Land.

Now, if you are anything like me, and if just a few days of leftovers gets to you, imagine how excited the Israelites must have been on that day to change from their diet of nearly 40 years...to go from manna to unleavened cakes and parched grain and crops from the land of Canaan! But manna is not the only thing that I think stopped that day...on that new day, that day when the disgrace of Egypt was rolled away. I think that what also may have begun to stop was the people’s awareness of God’s blessings in the wilderness, and that is not to suggest that God’s provision was altogether forgotten, after all we are talking about it right now!

But I imagine that for those next generation types, the ones who had been born in the wilderness and who had no personal experience with Egypt...all they knew was the wilderness, and all they could see now was the promised land, God’s future blessings.

I wonder – I wonder if they looked back at all or if they just ran headlong into God’s promised future as if they were running to meet God, as if God had not been with them the whole time. Ah, but he was! In the wilderness they had their manna, the presence of God in their midst. They had no burden of forging their freedom, or making allies, or waging war, or fashioning new rules for national governance, or building homes and communities. In the wilderness they had not one such preoccupation, not one of those kinds of worries. What they had though, was God!

Perhaps it was only as they ventured forward and experienced the necessary toil for their food and the complexities that would come for having established a monarchy; maybe then, they began to see the value of retrospect; maybe then they began to see more clearly God’s presence and God’s providence...even in the wilderness places.

I wonder if this idea of appreciating God's blessings was not also a presiding issue for our Prodigal Son, for he too looked elsewhere for blessings; indeed, he looked far beyond his present condition to find a presumed freedom and a future.

He never did seem to recognize the blessings associated with living in the home where he lived, the home wherein his father loved him and cared for him. In fact, I don't think it dawned on the Prodigal Son until very late in his life that his greatest joy was to be found in doing the will of his Father. And so, for a time, he went for it! He traveled to a distant place and he squandered his fortune with dissolute living. He ate and drank and he was merry. And he too didn't know what he had until it was gone!

Listen again to his anguish: "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!" We all know the rest of the story. The Prodigal Son returns home and is received with open arms. Still, the question remains for me: What if he had never left? What if we had never left?

What if, in whatever our present circumstances - be we in the wilderness or in the safety of our father's house - what if we could see God's benefits clearly from right where we are? What if we never had to struggle with not knowing what we had until it was gone? What if we never left in the first place?

We can do that, you know. In the time that remains for us this morning, I'll posit three simple ideas that could perhaps help us to become more acquainted with God's blessings...three simple things that we can do to help us remember and celebrate God from whom all blessings flow.

The first thing is quite simple. We can practice gratitude. I have shared with many of you before the following question: "What if when we woke up tomorrow we had only those things for which we gave thanks today?"

Just last week, Mary Caroline couldn't find a particular blanket with which she wanted to sleep - as you know, we were traveling, and so that became for us a bedtime of much needed consolation. As we were snuggling, and as I was trying to comfort her, I talked about how "Blankie" was one of those things that I personally didn't think about much - that is, until it was gone.

If I am being honest, in my case, there would likely be far less for me to see tomorrow than today, because seldom if ever do I take adequate time to recognize and to savor God's everyday banquets of grace - those blessings in my life...that manna which is so often overlooked. So perhaps that's as good a place to start as any - to start by practicing gratitude, to begin opening our eyes and searching for God's fingerprints...because they are all around us!

The second thing is also rather simple. It's to acknowledge how fragile life really is. There is often a great clarity about this reality which comes at the end of a person's life. Rarely is a person concerned with having not put in enough hours at work! No! They are usually far more concerned about having not worked hard enough on their relationships. Friends, becoming

more aware of just how precious and brief our time on this earth really is – it can help us to cherish life all the more...it will help us to make our time count, if in no other way than by investing ourselves more fully in the lives of those we love.

The third thing we can do may sound strange, but perhaps it might be for you the kind of beneficial exercise that it has been for me...for not unlike the prodigal, maybe we too should leave our Father's house...at least in our minds. What I mean is this: those things we see and perceive as God's blessings in our lives, we can intentionally imagine what life would be like without them. We can imagine being a prodigal son or daughter and living far away from the things that should have mattered to us.

The other day, in the heels of our "Blankie" conversation, I thanked God for our daughter, Mary Caroline, as if it was the last time that I would be able to do so. And I know that may sound morbid, but that is what I sometimes do in order to help myself realize and to remember just how dear something is to me and just how much I would miss it if it were gone...or if I were gone. How quickly life changes! Doing this helps me to cherish the blessings that accompany this life all the more. Believe you me, whether we see them or not, God's blessings are all around us. Be we in the wilderness, just chomping at the bit to begin a new chapter in our lives, as if God's blessings are mostly ahead of us; or if we are safe at home and under the canopy of God's grace, which, for whatever reason, we simply cannot perceive as a blessing...such blessings are nonetheless present!

Oh, lest we forget, God has not only been with us in the past, but he is right here, right now - God is alive and active and at work in your life and in mine! Oh, God's benefits are all around us, every day, more than we can count, more than we could ever imagine!

Listen again the words of the Psalmist: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless [God's] holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all [God's] benefits."

Let us pray...

Lord, by your grace, help us to practice gratitude and to realize just how fragile life really is. Help us to become ever more attune to the richness of your grace that we might continually live our lives as an offering of thanks and praise. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*