

Homily at St. John in the Wilderness Church, Flat Rock, NC
March 27, 2022, Fourth Sunday in Lent
Joshua 5:9-12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
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You will hear it long before you see it. It may sound at first like leaves gently fluttering in the breeze and then later, more like a stronger wind rushing through the trees and, as you get closer, like a thunderous roar. Your excitement builds as you hike along the trail and, as you make that final turn, there it is in front of you in all its raw power and beauty - a waterfall. We who live in this area of Western North Carolina know something of waterfalls. I read that there are over 250 in Transylvania County alone.

And we are drawn to them. Is it their beauty and majesty, their grandeur and aliveness, or their purity and movement - like nature dancing as the water falls and spins and splashes and fills us with joy? Probably all of these and more - is what takes us back to experience them time and time again.

I have come to appreciate them, not only for the reasons I've mentioned, but as a powerful symbol of God's love. A symbol we can see over and over again living here in the "land of waterfalls". In the never ending thundering water that dives over the rocks and falls to the pools below, and then down the stream, we can picture the divine love - always cascading and flowing; never ceasing - and

rushing out to us. Often the water gathers in pools right under the falls and we might think of these pools as the church; God's love flowing into the church (not the church building, but us, God's children, the church). Surely we have all dipped into that pool of love.

One of the realities of waterfalls is that the water keeps on coming. As we are filled with God's love, we soon see that it is so abundant, that it has to be shared with others. And so we let the water flow beyond these church walls to places where divine love needs to be shared and experienced - in hospitals, soup kitchens, homes of the poor and marginalized, in prisons, with the aged and infirm, and in the halls of government. Why? So the love of God will permeate all of creation and reconciliation will happen between God and us and amongst ourselves. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

The Hebrew people traveling with Moses after their escape from Egypt heavily relied on God's constant flow of love for their very existence. Their release from the Pharaoh was divinely orchestrated - a humanly impossible task that God made happen. God then sustained them for 40 years in the wilderness - providing manna and water from rocks to keep them alive. When they entered that land of milk and honey promised so many years earlier to their ancestor,

Abraham, God was there to guide them, providing strength and courage. God's love and grace just kept flowing - even when God's people were not all that grateful and didn't follow God's law all that well.

In our Gospel reading today, God was present to the younger son, the Prodigal Son, when he "came to his senses" after leaving home and living in a way that he knew was not wise, healthy, or happy. His plan was to return home and confess to his father and ask to be hired on as a worker there. But his full confession was never even heard by the father, who saw him from a distance and was so filled with joy, that he ran to him, gave him gifts, and immediately started planning a great feast to welcome home his son.

And don't we wish the Parable of the Prodigal Son ended there - with the father and son, happy beyond words, arms locked together, strolling toward the house where the feast and celebration were soon to happen. But that is not the end of the story.

There is another son, an older one, one who has been working faithfully on the family farm for years with little fanfare. When he hears that his brother has returned and that his father is planning to kill the fatted calf for a big celebration,

he is angry. He is fuming. He is beside himself. What has this brother of his done to deserve forgiveness at all much less such royal treatment? So he confronts his father with the fact that no party has ever been thrown for him and he has been faithful all these years. It just isn't fair.

But is God's grace fair? Does God keep a tally on our sins to see who is deserving of God's love and who is not? Or does the waterfall of God's love flow to all of creation? Maybe the brother does not realize that God's abundance of love and grace is not a scarce item that one must keep and hoard because, who knows, there may not be enough to go around. Maybe he doesn't realize that sharing this love does not diminish it, but will, instead, increase it. It is as if he has hoisted some rocks in place in that pool under the waterfall so that the water will not move on beyond him. And if he has done this, then he has also blocked the flow from the top since the path of the water no longer flows as it should. Because if one does not share God's love, then maybe he or she, also, does not fully accept it.

I wonder how much of our lives are spent living with the mentality of the older brother, in jealousy, anger, and suspicion that others are getting more than we are. How often do we forget that God's love is constantly flowing to us and to all

people. Or do we live life accepting divine love and care and then not being willing to see that others, particularly those we dislike, are worthy of it also?

Well, we are human and, from time to time, we have probably all had similar thoughts and feelings. Thankfully there are ways in which we can be helped to “come to our senses” and begin the process back to God, the Father, as did the Prodigal son. That young man started his conversation with his father, saying, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Each Sunday we kneel before God and say, “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you. We are truly sorry.”

Awareness of the problem and then confession is the start.

The Prodigal Son, after his confession, was immediately forgiven by his father, whose love for his son superseded any wrong doing. The father said, “Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” After our confession, the priest declares, in the name of Christ, forgiveness of our sins, and they are gone. We don’t hold on to them. God doesn’t hold on to them. But we move ahead, cleansed and purified. We were dead in our sins and were made alive again; lost but then found.

And just as the Prodigal son and his family and friends celebrated his return with a feast, so we offer the Peace to one another and, with joy and gratitude, come with our friends and families to that great feast, the Eucharist. And we celebrate being one with Christ and with each other, loving God and loving our neighbor.

It is then that we can go back out into the world rejoicing in the power of the living God - that God, whose love in majesty and power, beauty and abundance, movement and aliveness cascades down the rocks, into the pools, and flows down the stream to you, me, and all of creation. Amen.