

"LESSONS FROM A PIGSTY" – LUKE 15:1-3, 11B-32

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

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For the Christian, Lent is a time that one reflects on the condition of being human and the effects of sin both individually and corporately. Lent is a time where we are not only called to reflect on sins destructive power but likewise to consider new possibilities offered to us in Jesus. To many, the Lenten season has become synonymous with fasting from worldly pleasures. An outward show of an inward transformation demonstrated through self-denial and purification. With that pervading understanding, it's not lost on me that the title of this Sermonic reflection, *Lessons From A Pigsty* is somewhat oxymoronic given that representationally a *Pig Sty* is the furthest from mind when considering the season of purification with which we find ourselves. But such is the text that we find our attention called to in the lectionary.

The 15th Chapter of Luke's Gospel opens with Jesus being accosted by the Pharisees and scribes, the religious elite, for spending time with the wrong people, tax collectors and sinners. Then Jesus, in typical Jesus fashion turns and tells three parables: The Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Lost Prodigal Son. The lectionary lifts the ladder of these three parables, the Parable of the Lost Prodigal Son for our consideration. The Prodigal Son is perhaps one of the more familiar parables told by Jesus. The parable recounts that there was a man that had two sons, and the younger son asked his father to give him his inheritance. The father obliges his son's requests, splits his wealth and bequeaths the younger son his portion of the inheritance. No sooner than the son received his wealth did he gather all of his belongings and travel to a far-away land. The text goes on to say in the *b* portion of the 13th verse that the son "squandered his property (his wealth) in dissolute living." After the son spent everything, a famine struck the land leaving him destitute. The 15th verse picks up with the younger son feeding pigs after hiring himself out to a citizen farmer of the distant country.

Here, is a good place for us to pitch our metaphorical tent in the text- the Pigsty. Our text offers us a space in the Pigsty, to sit *in* and *with* the redemptive possibilities presented to us in pigsty encounters. Crossroad moments that can allow us to tap into the fullness God intends for us. For if we are going to take seriously the charge of the Lenten season: its call for us to consider our humanity and our propensity for sin, individually and collectively, and the possibilities offered to us by the way-maker, Jesus Christ; we must deal seriously with our text and the pigsties we encounters in our own lives.

The reality is if you have been on the journey of life for any significant period of time you can say unequivocally that none of us are exempt from pigsty experiences, valley encounters, low places in our lives that cause us to feel destitute, even alone. Truth be told, we probably would not have to think long to remember our last brush with a pigsty. But if we paused for a minute, we would do well to note that sometimes there are some lessons in the pigsty. Such is the case in Luke's account of our text for this Fourth Sunday of Lent.

The first lesson our pigsty encounters offers us is space for *Realization*. When we encounter pigsty moments, difficult though they may be, we open ourselves up to becoming more fully aware of ourselves and others. We find ourselves in the unique position to be able to take stock of our own lives and realize our emptiness. In the 16th verse we find the younger son reflecting on his plight. Luke writes, "He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything." It's here that we get the first indication that the is aware of plight. The son has two realizations: First that the place he finds himself is seems wholly inadequate a place to be; Second, he realizes no one gave him anything.

The text says the son had reached such a low that he considered eating the pigs food. To really understand the significance of this the sons realization you have to understand that to the ear of the 1st Century Jew hearing this parable, they would have immediately felt disgust at the mention of Pigs. According to Jewish customs pigs were considered unclean animals. But the younger son is not only with the pigs, he is considering eating what pigs eat. This would have been an even more surprising to the Jewish ear.

But, for the younger son his consideration of eating the pig food is instructive for us because he allows us to see not only what happens when we give over to our own self-serving and destructive habits but perhaps more importantly, he teaches us that while we may be in a pigsty encounter, we

still have the capacity to do something. And the thing that we ought do is begin by realizing if we are left to our own devices, we have the tendency to get ourselves in some pigsty places. We would do well to note that even in the younger sons blunder into the pigsty, he takes the first step toward exiting his pigsty. By beginning to come to terms with where he finds himself-a pigsty. The truth is we may not be able to avoid finding ourselves in some pigsties but when we do, we should make the choice acknowledge and realize where we are.

When we find ourselves in pigsty encounters not only do, we have to make the first step of realizing but we also have to recognize. We have to recognize our inadequacies without God and recognize what is offered to us in God. The text says in the 17th verse, “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!’” The younger son realized he was in a low place in the 16th verse and then he recognized his relationship to his father and the benefits from it in the 17th. The son recognizes that the pigsty may have him in a low place but he is still his father’s son and in his father’s house is bread better than the straps of pig food he is currently faced.

During this Lenten season, we should be like the younger son, and be called into a moment of memory. Where we remember whose we are and our divine connections to a 1st Century Palestinian named Jesus, the bread of life. We ought to respond to our pigsty moments recognizing that no matter how far astray we may think we are and how outside of the fold we may feel that there is always a way to change course so long as we recognize what is offered to us in God. In God, through Jesus we are given a divine love that can be seen in grace. That divine love alone is reason enough to recognize that despite our present circumstance nothing can separate us from the love of God.

After we realize our current situation and recognize what is offered in God then we can be restored. Our pigsty encounters provide us with an opportunity to choose to be restored and put in right relationship with God. Luke writes in the 18th verse, “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.’” The son makes the conscious decision to go back home. Perhaps the most jarring aspect of this verse is that the son had all but wish the father dead by asking for his inheritance. Considering customarily the inheritance was only given at the death of the father. Yet, the son even in his blunder chooses to be restored into right relationship with his father.

Much like the younger son in our pigsty encounters we must know that we always have the ability to be restored into right relationship with God. That the only thing standing between us and restoration to right relationship with God is the choice to go home. The younger son reminds us that our capacity to be transformed is always available but we must intentionally choose it.

Perhaps that's the good news in the text. Though we may stray the pigsty may not be the worst place, rather our inability to take stock of our own lives and the ways we make destructive decision that are death dealing for us and others. Perhaps as the Lukan writer opens the 15th chapter we should give more attention to the places and people that have been rendered unsavory and disgusting. While the Pharisees and scribe thought that Jesus should not hang with sinners because they were unclean, Jesus hanging out with Tax collectors and Sinners is instructive. Jesus is inviting us much like in the parable of the Prodigal Son to have a God encounter in what some would see as the muck but what God sees as a sight for transformation.

In this way maybe the text is calling our attention to the transformative moment that pigsties can have on and in our lives. Maybe, it's in the pigsties, or places folk have deemed as dirty, nasty, unredeemable that we realize more about ourselves and our relationship to God and others. Should we then not conclude that the Lesson from the Pigsty is not only do they have redemptive possibilities but they likewise allow us to interrogate and transform our own self-serving tendencies to an orientation that centers our relationship to God and others.

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