

*a shambles between us*

a sermon preached on the  
*fourth sunday in lent*

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by the reverend colleen clayton*

the lections: Joshua 5: 9a, 10-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**The Prodigal's Mother Speaks to God**  
**Allison Funk**

When he returned a second time  
the straps of his sandals broken  
his robe stained with wine,

it was not as easy to forgive.

By then his father  
was long gone himself,

leaving me with my other son, the sullen one  
whose anger is the instrument he tunes  
from good morning on.

I know.

There's no room for a man  
in the womb.

But when I saw my youngest coming from far off  
so small he seemed, a kid  
unsteady on its legs.

She-goat  
what will you do? I thought,  
remembering when he learned to walk.

Shape shifter! It's like looking through water –  
the heat bends, it blurs everything: brush precipice.

A shambles between us.

*The Knot Garden*: Sheep Meadow Press, 2002.

*A shambles between us.*

There would not be many families who do not know the pain of estranged relationships; loved ones who, for one reason or another, cannot find peace between them. How well this poem by Allison Funk

captures the sense of things shifting and blurring, of the confusion and mess that can exist between people, even people who love each other and want things to be different and better!

To one of the best-known parables in the Bible, Funk's poem adds the voice of the mother in a story of the relationships between three men. She provides us with another character who invites the listener to identify with the very human interactions that are described.

Funk's poem also explores some of the wonderings that this parable evokes.

What if the youngest son did it again, and perhaps again? What does forgiveness look like then?

If the father could run to greet the youngest son, why did he not go himself to tell his elder son the news? Why did the elder son hear the news of his brother's return at the end of the day, from a servant, rather than from his father?

And what of the elder son? Will he be able to overcome his pain and anger and join the feast or will he continue to be excluded by the rules of fair play to which he clings?

This Gospel reading was set for Morning Prayer last week. At the conclusion of our prayers, a person who was there wondered aloud, what happened next? A lively and rich conversation ensued as those present explored some of the possibilities. I am so grateful for a faith tradition that gifts us with stories that invite us to wonder, that blur the lines between those who are in and those who are out, refusing to reduce life to a simple formula.

This parable is so well known and yet it is so powerful that it continues to have new things to say to us. It is the third in a sequence of parables; the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son; each of which explores the theme of the joy experienced in heaven when the lost is found.

New Testament scholar, the Jesuit Brendan Byrne, says that this sequence of parables replaces a "sin/forgiveness" trajectory with a trajectory of "human beings lost/human beings found" trajectory. The first trajectory is that of the scribes and Pharisees, the second that of Jesus and ultimately of God.<sup>1</sup>

The behaviour in these parables is over-the-top and that is the point. God's love for us does not make sense. It doesn't conform to human expectations of proportion, reason or even fairness. God celebrates joyfully over the home coming of each and every person. They don't have to do anything to deserve it, in fact they can't do anything to deserve it. This is the model Jesus gives of God's love. God simply wants to be in relationship with us.

God's desire for broken humanity can be seen right from the beginning. The first question God asks in the Bible is 'Adam, where are you?' (Genesis 3:9). Adam and Eve had done the one thing they were told not to do but God searches for them, calling them by name, seeking to find them and bring them back to Godself.

Originally, Jesus directed this sequence of stories towards the scribes and Pharisees who had been criticising him for eating with sinners and tax collectors. God, the stories show, celebrates the home coming of the lost, and invites us to do the same.

The trap into which the scribes and Pharisees fell was that they thought they could find God through their own efforts. They believed that they knew how to behave so that they could search for God, find God and be recognised as acceptable to God. But God always takes the initiative in finding us and this is an important thing to remember.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams puts it like this:

The trouble with putting the human search for God at the heart of things is that it can lead to a self-important, individualistic religiosity that talks glibly about 'my spiritual journey' as a thing in itself, a fascinating exercise in a specialist activity, a very elevated hobby.

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<sup>1</sup> Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel*, St Paul's Publications, 2015, 142.

God loves us for no purpose but our life and flourishing; we do not first have to become acceptable. By that love we are set free for trust and risk; and our love begins to reflect God's.<sup>2</sup>

As the early churches began to struggle with how to accept and welcome gentiles into the family of God, the parable of the lost son gave voice to God's inclusive love. God could welcome those who were far off, celebrating over them with love and challenging those who had been with God always, to do the same.

The human search for God needs to be grounded in the knowledge that we can only find God because God has already found us. And it is not just us and people like us for whom God is searching. God loves, and calls us to love, those who we would consider outcasts, strangers, enemies. It is in the struggle to welcome and see the full humanity of people who are not like us that we learn to express the kind of love that God expresses to us; the kind of love that, while we were still far off, sought us in God's son and brought us home.

The parable of the lost son continues to challenge those who hear it today, inviting us to re-consider the way in which we understand our relationships with each other and with God.

The youngest son invites us to consider the times when we have wilfully chosen our own way, demanding what is ours and acting without thought of the cost to others. Once the youngest son comes to his senses and decides to return home, he thinks that perhaps his repentance can earn him the rights of a slave in his father's house. But his father has a completely different attitude. He is not thinking about sin and the need for repentance, but of the difference between his son being lost and found, dead and alive.

The father's extravagant celebration over the youngest son's return demonstrates again the love of a God who cares only about relationship. The person is more important than what has, or has not, been done. This person was made to be God's beloved child and on returning, the welcome of God is not for a penitent servant who must be punished, but for a beloved child. When God welcomes us in this way, dare we go in and celebrate?

For years, I preferred the elder son in this story. Yes, he is grumpy, but no wonder! He has worked hard for his father all those years. He has behaved, in his own words, like a slave to his father.

But whereas I used to think how selfless he was, I can now hear the transactional way in which he perceives his relationship with his father. There is no sense that this son has behaved out of an overflowing joy and celebration of love. Instead, there is a sense of grudging duty, tasks done in the expectation of reward. Now, he is filled with resentment. He disowns his brother, referring to him as *your son* and doesn't even acknowledge his relationship with his father, rudely referring to him as *you*.

As with the youngest son, this is not the way the father wants things to be. In speaking to this angry son, the father reminds him of their relationship; *son you are always with me and all that is mine is yours* (Luke 15: 31). When God welcomes those we deem unworthy in this way, dare we stay outside and seethe?

Watching out for his youngest son, seeing him while he is still a long way off, the father is filled with compassion, runs to him, throws his arms around him and kisses him. The father is a man of wealth, honour and dignity but he picks up his robes and runs to his lost son.

Out of extravagant, crazy love for us God risks pain and rejection. Love will not force the beloved to respond and this means that Love might wait forever for someone who never comes. But our hope,

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *God in Search: A Sermon*  
<https://www.spucc.org/sites/default/files/Rowan%20Williams%20augustine.pdf>

our joy, our salvation, all this depends on the risk that God takes in waiting for us, ready to run to us and bring us home, rejoicing.

Can we dare accept a God who acts with such foolish love?

The Lord be with you.