

Sermon – Proper 19 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 15:1-10 – Baptism of Thomas Truslow

I've been thinking a lot about my life lately. I find myself in quiet moments reflecting on how I got to be where I am today. I grew up thinking my life wasn't that remarkable. I just seemed to do what most other people from my village did. I was the second son of my father. I wasn't a big kid. I was kind of shy too. I always felt that my siblings, especially my older brother, got more attention than I did.

My mom and dad were traditional parents. Strict. Mom spent most of her time doing traditional work in the kitchen and taking care of the home. She was more light-hearted than my father but always slightly reserved. My father was stern as you'd expect the head of the house. He didn't say much, at least to me. But I did feel his wrath when I messed up. He was often away as he was a publican who worked for the government.

When it was time for me to find work my father insisted that I follow him into his business and learn his ways. It didn't really appeal to me but as I didn't know what else I wanted to do, and he told me in no uncertain terms I wasn't to slack off, I ended up relenting. I started working for my father when I was 15 but I soon realized I wasn't really suited to the work and wanted to leave. But he convinced me to stay.

I knuckled down to learn the ropes. Soon I found I was good at the work and started to rise through the ranks. I did eventually appreciate that I could earn good money even if I didn't really like the work. I found myself dreaming about being a boss and running my own operation. When the time came, I felt confident to step out and do my own thing and I felt ready to bid for one of the government contracts.

By this stage I was well-known, and truth be told I was a little feared in the community. My dad had trained me well and I was good at my job. I made him a lot of money but made a number of enemies along the way. When the government auctioned the new contracts, I was the highest bidder for the area centered on the town of Sythapolis in the Jordon valley, almost midway between Tiberias and Jerusalem. The land there was good and fertile and very productive.

As a publican I had to be shrewd. I had carefully calculated the taxes I thought I could pay the Romans for all the land in my area and then what taxes I could actually levy on the land owners and tenants. I hired my team and set about to collect what I was owed.

The beauty of the public / private partnership with the government was that I was largely left alone. All I had to do was to ensure that the payments I had to make were made on time. That's all they cared about. Getting their monthly revenue. If a landowner couldn't pay me then I took his farm produce at a discounted price and then sold it to the highest bidder. The profit was mine. No one liked me but I didn't care. I was making money and I had a good life.

As time went on, I found myself spending more and more time managing my workers and stopping them from stealing from me. I was a tough boss and did things that today I am not proud of but at the time I demanded respect. That was the way of life. It was do and die.

I sometimes met with other publicans, or tax collectors. At one meeting I met a fellow called Matthew who seemed to be doing well from his contracts. So, I started to model myself after him, but it wasn't great because I felt fake and realized I wasn't being authentic to myself.

One day when I was in the market square I heard a great commotion coming toward me. I asked someone what was happening and was told it was a rabbi who often arrived with a crowd. I had heard that there was a rabbi who was different from the others and was followed all over by people, ordinary folk and the religious folk, who often challenged him. I think they saw him as a threat.

I was curious to meet this young rabbi, so I went over to where he was sitting. A number of my peers and subordinates were already there and they had pushed aside most of the other people. The Pharisees had gathered a little way off and were clearly grumbling about this man. I hated these people with all their pious talk and double standards. But they were just like me, eager to take advantage of a situation. They were just less explicit than I was.

Anyway, the rabbi began to speak by telling a couple of stories. The first one was about a shepherd who had lost a sheep. He had decided to leave all the others and go and search for the lost one. I would have been worried the others would have run away so I wouldn't have gone after just one. The shepherd eventually found the lost sheep and he was so happy that he called together his friends and they celebrated.

The second story was about a woman who lost a coin in her house. I didn't think much of losing loose change, in fact I often just let it roll away rather than chase after it. But this woman persevered and searched and searched her house until finally she found it. It must have been really important to her. She too invited in her neighbors and they celebrated. I was intrigued by how the rabbi ended the stories. After both, he said that there would be great joy in heaven over the lost person who was found, the sinner who repents.

When this rabbi, Jesus was his name, ended these stories he was looking directly at me, directly into my eyes. I remember being transfixed by his gaze and sort of lost all sense of place. I got goose bumps. He went on to tell another story about a lost son who one day returned, burnt out and weary. I was already hooked. I wanted to find out more about this teacher. He connected with me just in his gaze like no one had ever done before. I was so used to being reviled and excluded.

The encounter with this man Jesus changed me. Don't ask me exactly how but it did. I felt he was calling me like the lost sheep and saw me like the lost coin. I had never felt

that way before. I went away feeling very different. I went back to my house and just sat still reliving the experience again and again. I knew I needed to talk to someone.

I sought out Matthew, who I had admired as a fellow publican, who I had heard had left the business to follow this rabbi. When I eventually found him, he was eager to sit with me and to tell me all about Jesus, his teacher. He explained to me that Jesus was from God and had been born to save us from ourselves. This was his unique calling.

He taught me that every person was related to God before they were related to anything else. He said God continued to call people to the recognition that they are defined by God's purpose for them, even if they didn't understand or acknowledge it. I knew people searched for meaning in their lives but this was altogether a new way to see life.

I became even more curious. Matthew said that there is a level of my life, my existence, that others could not see, nor could they ever control, because it exists only in relation to God. I came to understand that deep within me was a unique set of capabilities and possibilities that come forth for the purposes of God in the world. I had never seen myself this way before. He was saying that I had dignity as a human, fully a creation of God. I was in fact included and accepted as I was, even though I made people's lives hell. It did though get me thinking of what God's purposes for me were.

Matthew taught me that Jesus' message to us was a declaration that nothing is more God-like and precious than a single human person. He said my relationship with Jesus would set free my intrinsic gifts for the service of others. My gifts, and those of others whether financial, or spiritual or intellectual or administrative or creative, are offered to the world for everyone's benefit not just mine.

I decided that this was a world I wanted to live in, a world where I was accepted and seen, a world where my gifts were recognized by the community. No longer did I want to live on the margins treating everyone unjustly for my benefit and the benefit of the state. As I know reflect on my life and share it with you, I am amazed at how this one meeting, this one experience, changed my life. If you follow Jesus you too will be changed.

The story of this tax collector could be any of our personal stories. It is the story of God's intrinsic love for us that is manifested in a deeply personal relationship that only each of us can know. It is the story of curiosity and searching and perseverance. This is a story that also applies to Thomas, who is just starting out on his life.

In a moment we will gather at the font to baptize Thomas in a tradition dating back to when John baptized Jesus in the river Jordan. Thomas will be anointed with oil and the Holy Spirit will be sealed into him, as an irrevocable promise of God. God's spirit will accompany him for the rest of his life and they will share this unique bond, known only to them.

Thomas will grow up being nurtured by his parents Nichole and Frank, his brother Teddy, his godparents and his wider family. He will also be nurtured by his faith

community. All of us together will have some influence on his personhood but we pray that Thomas will find God's spirit, understood through the life of Jesus Christ, and this will be the biggest influencer in his life.

Only God knows the breadth and depth of Thomas' life. God has defined Thomas' eternal purpose, which can't be altered but is to be discovered. Only Thomas can grow in awareness of it and make of it what he can. The spirit of God will shine from him if we all continue to stand by him and support him no matter how his life evolves. His dignity as a person of God cannot be diluted.

This is what we celebrate today with Thomas, and Teddy, Nichole and Frank. We celebrate this unique bond with God that the sacrament of baptism gives. Jesus gave to the church this sacrament so as to perpetuate his love for all people. So let's now gather with us at the font if you can as we welcome Thomas into the church, and into a new life in Christ.

Amen.