

Today, we have one of the better-known stories told by Jesus. Often called the story of the prodigal son. But as I was reflecting on the Biblical readings for today, I was struck-- and stuck-- at the opening line of our first reading:

*The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.* This didn't make sense to me because God is speaking to the Hebrew people. They have just come out of their 40-year journey through the wilderness and have arrived at Gilgal, a place of new beginnings-- but why in the world was their time in Egypt a disgrace? It's not their fault they were enslaved. Why would they need disgrace rolled away? That's blaming the victim. Why would those who escaped have carried disgrace with them like a heavy stone for 40 years passing the weight from one generation to another? Weren't the Egyptian enslavers and abusers the ones who behaved disgracefully?

And then it hit me, the ancient-modern wisdom in this text. Many people do carry around the burden of things they had no control over, things done to them, things that press down with the weight of shame or disgrace. Of course, we shouldn't shoulder this unfair burden but the fact is that like those ancient Hebrews, we often do. We know now that trauma can even be passed down genetically. And it can take a divine power to replace disgrace with amazing grace, to dislodge and roll that shame away, like a heavy stone rolled from a tomb, so that true new life can emerge. It turns out that this morning's Lenten reading gives us a preview of Easter dawn. Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt. The women went to the tomb and They found the stone rolled away from the tomb.

As part of researching my family history, I visited one of the few relatives from my father's generation who was still alive at the time, Renate. Her father was my grandmother's brother. He was Jewish but her mother was not, so the Nazis labeled Renate as a *mischling* which means mongrel, like a dog. Like Jews, half-Jewish young people were denied entrance to universities, trade schools and many jobs. Renate spoke of how that felt and how her cousin, my father, fully Jewish, absorbed the hate of his time: She said: "It was so hard, no one can understand. To be told every day you have no worth, no intelligence, that you are worse than a worm, to be told over and over. No one can understand how hard it was." Well, some people can understand.

I heard their stories from the young people at my former church's shelter. One night at dinner, when Jose was thirteen, he told his mother that he was gay, and she began stabbing him with her fork while yelling, "This is a Christian home!" He has a row of scar bumps on his arm and another on his side from the fork attack. Jose and so many others are not to blame for the cruel and dehumanizing messages that assault them spiritually, mentally and bodily, but it can be hard to get out from under the weight of this kind of abuse. The Hebrews couldn't do it alone either. Maybe you or someone you know is familiar with the terrible burden of shame, for whatever reason. Our reading tells us that God rolled the stone away, but we know that God can work through our hands.

One of the things the shelter does is celebrate birthdays- with cake and ice cream, small gifts and lots of decorations. For some, it's the first time a birthday has ever been celebrated. It may not seem like much, but to gather around, offer support and love, and cake with candles and a safe, welcoming space ringing with voices singing happy birthday to you ...well, it can be life-changing. "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." And those little birthday cake candles, the trick ones with the flames that keep coming back- and back, and back, shine in the darkness as a sign of the light that the darkness has not overcome.

I love the backpack project you support here in Kingston, so that children in need can take home a backpack of food for the weekend, without having to feel shame or hunger. And the food you collect

for Trinity's pantry. I love that the bags sit on a pew with us in the sanctuary, a reminder of the connection between our prayers and our actions.

A celebration with food is at the heart of our Biblical story too. Those who inherited the trauma of slavery are called to celebrate a Passover meal. This will be the very first Passover for those who came of age in the wilderness. Like a blessing of food or a birthday, it is a celebration of identity, a reminder that says you matter, you are precious, your true inheritance is grace not condemnation, freedom not oppression. You are a beloved child of God. The God who broke your chains and led you through the wilderness years, is with you in this new stage of the journey, in this new place.

But our text reminds us that new beginnings can bring fear and losses too. In the wilderness, the people were fed by manna from the sky. Each morning, they woke up to fresh manna. Sure, they got sick of it and grumbled about it from time to time, but it was how God fed them and took care of them. Now for the first time, there will be no more manna from the sky. They will settle down and eat the produce of the land.

But settling can be unsettling. At this crossroads, our Biblical ancestors at Gilgal faced a new danger. That they will lose their way and turn to local idols. The reason they are told to celebrate the Passover right away is to keep them from forgetting their identity as children of God and what that means for them. And so we keep reading we see that they are told: *For your God is...the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger and the immigrant, for you were strangers and immigrants in the land of Egypt.*

But they forgot. They settled for their own well-being as a group and neglected the command to love those on the margins. Like the prodigal son, they squandered their precious inheritance in selfish living and these heirs of promise found themselves in a far country- also like the prodigal son- exiled from the very land they once entered with such expectation.

The younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. There are many ways to squander an inheritance. Am I a thankful, caring steward of all that has been given to me? Are there ways in which I am wasteful? Am I complicit in a consumeristic pattern of dissolute living that leaves many destitute? It was a material inheritance that the son in the story squandered but he also received a spiritual inheritance, an inheritance of relationships to family and to community. All of whom he walked away from.

A family, or family member, can squander the love entrusted to them by rejecting a child who doesn't live up to their rigid expectations. A church has squandered trust when it hides abuse. The church squanders an inheritance of mercy when it gives voice to hatred. A church can squander the inheritance of past generations by using it for institutional maintenance alone rather than to advance the mission of Jesus to "bring good news to the poor." When Christians gather to praise God and ignore the needs of others, including the stranger and the immigrant, the hungry and unhoused, then praises wither and worship becomes a dried-out husk only fit for pig food.

He traveled to a distant country and squandered his property in dissolute living. The squandering done by the younger son in our story seems like small potatoes compared with the vast inheritance our nation is squandering. When dissolute living of some has left the poor of our own land nothing but the crumbling husks of mercy. Are we not squandering many of the advances of science? Are we not squandering a history of free thinking, free press, free libraries? I know a scientist who has done

amazing work in Africa helping to combat AIDS. Her work has saved so many lives. But as of last week, her work has been decimated. All of her global projects have been abruptly ended. Are we not squandering our capacity for international leadership? Our ability to have a credible voice on human rights and negotiations for peaceful coexistence in other regions? Are we not squandering the glorious wealth of our natural environment, God's good creation? There are many ways to squander an inheritance. In a distant country or in our nation's capital or at family tables or church meetings.

After the younger son squanders his property, a famine strikes. A time of reckoning. The younger son began to be in need. 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 corn husks that the pigs were eating and no one gave him anything.

He tried to satisfy himself with the husks. In times of economic distress, it's tempting to settle for the leftovers, to conclude that given our own diminished harvest, we have little left to share. Or we convince ourselves that we must be resigned to the husks of justice. The younger son in the story Jesus tells found himself with such husks among the pigs but then we read that he came to himself. He realized that there was an alternative, that the far country in which he found himself was not a place he had to stay. And in spite of the error of his ways, while he was still far off, his father sees him and is filled with compassion. He runs and puts his arms around him and kisses him! He covers his shame with a beautiful robe, places the ring of inheritance back on his finger and sandals on those wayward feet and prepares a feast to celebrate this homecoming!

Do we deserve another chance? Even after such a history of squandering? No, it is sad to say, we are no longer worthy to be called beloved sisters, brothers and siblings in our global family or closer to home among beloved children of God treated as unwanted strangers; We are no more deserving than the prodigal son of the story was worthy of his wondrous homecoming, but...it really seems too good to be true, nevertheless, it is true... we have another chance! That is the gospel. We are invited to remember who we are, remember WHOSE we are, our true home where the thanksgiving feast is spread out so that ALL may know abundant life. A gathering and meal where we thank God that even while we are still far off, far from where we need to be as a nation, far from where we need to be as a church, far from where we need to be in our work for justice and our call to love our neighbors as ourselves, even while we are still far off, God is running to us to pull us towards the table where a prodigal feast awaits us.

And then like our spiritual ancestors at Gilead after their first Passover, we can rise from the table to plant our crops, the seeds of love and goodness for our day. In times of stress, we can be tempted to turn in on ourselves. But Kingston needs you to go out and plant those gospel seeds. Jesus needs your witness. More than ever. As hateful, disgraceful rhetoric swirls around us, inciting real damage on real lives, Kingston needs your ongoing witness of loving God in worship and loving, feeding, helping, defending neighbors. Planting the seeds and trusting God to bring the growth.

Soon we will remember Jesus's own last supper at a Passover table. His extravagant, prodigal gifts of life and love and forgiveness. Of course, nobody will force us to the table. Some may choose the way of the older brother, angry that his wayward younger sibling was not only welcome in the door but celebrated. Sadly, the elder brother chose to remain outside the celebration, dining on the bitter husks of his resentment.. The father rushes out to him as well, urging him to return home from the far country of his discontent. Will he? We don't know the end of his story. We can only hope he makes the right choice. The only choices WE can make are our own. The door is open. The feast awaits. May we choose well. Amen.

