

Homily 9/15/19

Psalm 51, the Psalm assigned to this Sunday, was immediately familiar to me. Growing up in the Lutheran church we sang part of this Psalm as we prepared for communion.

This is how I remember it:

*“Create in me a clean heart O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.”*

I remember as a young church-goer, having questions about the words, *thy presence*. Wait, I thought...

are there **presents** in church? I was pretty sure I had never **seen** any presents, but I was one of the youngest members of a large family, and I knew all too well that when you're little, people don't always tell you everything. You had to be on the look out or you could miss out. For example, I'm told that when I was a baby and my parents took us all out for ice cream they would give me an empty ice cream cone. It wasn't until an appalled stranger gave me one with ice cream in it that I discovered what my 3 older siblings had been enjoying all along. And there was no going back to empty ice cream cones after that! I decided to keep my eye out for any church presents.

Then one year, as my birthday approached, I noticed something else about this psalm - **cast me not away** from thy **Presents**?!! Hold on, Could they **do that**? Could I not only miss out on the presents that may or may not be at church, but could I be **cast away from presents**?!

I decided I had better pay very close attention to being outstandingly good in church. I didn't understand how it worked, but there appeared to be a possibility that religion could either bring me presents - or cast me away from them. And I knew which one I preferred.

But even then, I knew I didn't always have a clean heart. I got bored in church. I mostly liked the cookies and playing with the other kids after the service was over. So within just a few minutes of taking this internal, solemn vow to be good in church I would get pretty wiggly waiting for the "boring" part to be over so I could get to the good part.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, I did not resolve this dilemma in the second grade. As I became a young adult I found myself way off the path. Like my younger self, I was focusing on the fun things in life, and giving short shrift to the "boring" ones. Somewhere inside I knew was getting lost, but in the beginning I was having so much fun I didn't want to be found.

It all changed very quickly for me. The wheels fell off, the party was over, and I found myself back in church, but this time I was in the basements and community rooms where people drink bad coffee, eat cookies and smoke way too many cigarettes. Yes, I found myself back in church through the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I was embarrassed and ashamed of the person I had become. How had I so completely lost my way? I felt cast away and I knew no one had done it but me.

The guilt and remorse that alcoholics and addicts feel when faced with their past behaviors can be overwhelming. It's difficult to believe that anyone, and particularly an all-knowing God, would be searching for someone who had behaved so badly and caused so much harm. At first I still didn't want to be found, but not because I was having fun, my drinking had stopped being fun and turned dark and out of control. The fun of my partying days was over and I knew it. Now I was hiding because I was looking at the wreckage of my past through sober eyes.

In a discussion of Luke 15, the author asks "what is it to lose faith but to lose the conviction that one has been found, to begin to wonder whether one is sought at all. And I think that is a very lost feeling. If one is lost in the woods, that is one thing. But to be lost in the woods and questioning if anyone is even looking for you, that is despair.

But, it is in seeing oneself as a sinner - as the tax collector and not the Scribe or Pharisee - that we put ourselves into the place where we can be found. Once I began wondering if I could be found, if God was even looking for me after all I had done I became receptive to God working within me. And thank God, that is all that God required of me.

And, thanks to God and AA I have been sober for a long time now. Things are better. My journey has taken me from the basement to the nave. And in a surprise twist to this pulpit! I am not the lost soul I was back then. Luke 15 suggests that if we are in a place where we feel more like the Scribes and Pharisees, more found and less lost, our job is to rejoice and welcome home the lost sheep, and to celebrate together finding the lost coin. Because both the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin end by calling together friends and neighbors to join in the celebration.

This is something that the fellowship of AA does well. When a newcomer attends a meeting they are told they are the most important person in the room. Because their experience reminds the others that the life of addiction has not gotten any better.

And when an AA member returns to the group after a relapse they are met with joy. Welcome back! "The only thing that matters is you're here now!" Thank God you made it back to us."

I'm roughly 50 years older than I was when I was pondering what I would need to do to find the church presents. Being given a second chance at life certainly feels like a precious gift. I'm still working on having a clean heart and a steadfast spirit. But the joyful news from today's readings is that we don't have to be good enough, or clean enough, or steadfast enough to receive these gifts. We are meant to try. AA calls it trudging the road of happy destiny. But even if we lose our way, God is always reaching out to us, we have only to allow ourselves to be found.

-Janet Downes