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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
4th Sunday in Lent/Year C
March 31, 2016
Text: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

There is a wideness in God's mercy

*There is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner, and more graces for the good;
There is mercy with the Savior; there is healing in his blood.*

I don't recall singing this hymn growing up in church but it is one that I have come to love and appreciate at this time in my life. Sometimes as we 'look back over our lives and we think things over, we can truly say that we have been blessed. We have a testimony' (as an old gospel song says) to what God has done for us and who God is in our lives. I think that most of us can see and perhaps testify to God's goodness, and grace and mercy in our lives. Can't we?

We are now deep with this season of Lent which calls us to repent and to turn back God. In last week's gospel Jesus reminded us that it is imperative that we do just that. He told the parable of the fig tree in the vineyard and how the owner was ready to chop it down because it had not born fruit but that the gardener was willing to work with it. Jesus never said what became of the fig tree but we can think that God is like the gardener who was willing to do whatever it took not only to keep the tree alive but to see that it did indeed produce fruit. Like the gardener there is a wideness in God's mercy. For God was willing to do what whatever it took to keep humankind in relationship-the commandments, covenant after covenant, and prophets.

As I reflected a little more this week on the fig tree and of the gardener's goodness it came to me that the tree was treated more kindly than we human beings have treated each other since the beginning of creation. We are often quick to make judgements, to grow impatient, to treat others unfairly, to treat each other not as equals but as inferiors. We bully and lash out sometimes with disastrous consequences. We are slow to say we are sorry. Sometimes even slower to forgive. We are human after all; a

complicated lot, frail in nature and have been ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden. Still, there was hope. God never gave up.

And then along came Jesus, God's only begotten Son, who reminds those who follow him that there is a better way to be for us to be in relationship-a relationship that mirrored how God sees us and loves us and calls us to love and accept one another be we sinners or saints, and sometimes a little bit of both. To the crowds and religious leaders Jesus tried to get that point across.

We are now in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel and as Jesus continues on his way to Jerusalem, the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling more and more about the company that Jesus was known to keep. For he not only dined with Pharisees, many of whom thought they were holier than thou, but Jesus was also known to eat at the table of sinners, people at the bottom of the food chain. They were taking it upon themselves to say who was worthy and who was not.

It is at this point in Luke's gospel that Jesus tells a series of parables or stories to describe God's response to what was lost but then found. To show how the least and unlikely makes the heart of God glad. To show how inclusive God's love was meant for everyone.

Jesus tells one of his best known parables, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is curious that nowhere in the text the words "prodigal son" are used. And I found myself looking up once again what the word "prodigal" means. Webster's dictionary gives two definitions of the word. 1. Exceedingly or recklessly wasteful. And 2. Extremely abundant. So if we approach the text using these two definitions are we really hearing a story about a prodigal son or a prodigal father? Is there more we ought to listen for?

Jesus says: A father had two sons. The younger son asks his father for his portion of his inheritance early. In early Palestine this was an insult to the father. No self-respecting son would do such a thing. In essence, he is telling his father, "You are dead to me. I don't need you. I want what is coming to me and I want it now." The father does not admonish the younger son. He obviously loves him and he gives his son what he asks for. The son then went off to a big city and squandered away all his inheritance. As luck would have it a famine took place in the land. Things could not get any worse. But they do. Not only is he broke and hungry but to get by, the only

job he could find was work on a pig farm. No self-respecting Jewish person would ever come close to a pig. But here he was. Starving, slopping pigs and smelling like pig poo.

The story continues to find that the son finally comes to his senses and prays that he might come back into his father's graces. So he sets off for home, expecting no welcome or any mercy. He could only hope to be treated at the very least as one of his father's hired hands, though not as his father's son.

As he gets closer to his father's property he sees a figure running toward him. Again, this is another odd moment in the story because no early Palestinian patriarch would be caught running anywhere! But here was the father's son making his way to his son. He had kept vigil all the while. Without any words of condemnation, the father sweeps his ragged and smelly baby boy into his opened arms. He's given a new robe, a ring, a new pair of shoes, and a welcome home celebration. The father exclaimed, "My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" What had been broken was now being made new. Nice story, isn't it? But that was not the end.

The older son had been in the fields and asks about the ruckus he hears coming from the house. And, well, he wants nothing to do with his brother's homecoming. He is the good son and has done everything the father has asked of him since he was a little boy. "This son of yours," he said with resentment for his brother. 'I have been here all this time! I have been the one slaving in the fields! You've never thrown me a party! Why should there be a party for him? He insulted you. He embarrassed the family. He deliberately walked away. He squandered away family money. Why would you celebrate someone so worthless?'

The father began to reason with his eldest son. Again, something the father did not have to do. 'Son,' the father said to him, 'you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Your portion is coming in due time. Settle down. I see you. I got you. But you see, we have to celebrate. We have to rejoice because this brother of yours was dead. He has come to life. He was lost and has been found!'

Jesus's story is not just about a father and his two sons but it is a reminder about who we are and God's generous love for us and for all whom God loves.

The youngest son is sometimes like ourselves. We are sometimes that prodigal son or daughter; reckless and foolish with the gifts we have been given. We have made mistakes; done the wrong thing or said the wrong thing or didn't speak up or do anything when we should have. There have been times that we have been disappointments to loved ones, friends, neighbors, co-workers, church members, to ourselves, maybe even to God. Sometimes we may think that we are all but helpless and hopeless. But we are reminded as the youngest son was reminded by his father-that God is compassionate, loving and forgiving. God says to us, I see you. I got you. I love you. I will not let you go.

Many of us have had those moments of resentment and jealousy like the older brother who stands outside sulking instead of joining the party. We tell ourselves that we have worked hard all our lives. We value loyalty and responsibility. We've shown up and on time, and we try to always do and to say the right things. We like it when everything is fair and square. But then we bristle when others are equally blessed and then some especially when we think they are undeserving. Still, like that son who the father also loved; we are reminded that God is always with us. And God says, I see you. I got you too. I will never withhold my blessings from you.

And oh but then, we come to the father, that prodigal father, who gave freely to his sons (and especially to his youngest) without reservation, and without hesitation, and without question-his love and forgiveness and mercy. That father is like our God who gives to everyone in abundance and is glad beyond measure when the lost find their way home.

This is God's message for us today. We will never be perfect on this side of the grave. But God does not give up on us. Just know that when we become lost, when we fail and stumble, when we sin-God is always ready to embrace us with opened arms and rejoice because we are so loved. Loved, not by anything we do but because that is who God is.

God says to all God created-I see you. I got you too. And I will never let you go. My love, my grace, my forgiveness are yours!

This is Good News that we as ambassadors for Christ ought to be sharing with others and all of God's creation.

*For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we should take him at his word;
And our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.*

Amen.