

Let us pray...O Lord, open our hearts to hear Your Word and guide us in sharing this Good News! In your name we ask, Amen. Please be seated.

Good Morning! and Welcome to Laetare (LAY-TAR-EE) Sunday!

How interesting is it to experience this Laetare Sunday in the middle of our Lenten Season? In today's bulletin (here in print and online), Father Sam has shared the history and explanation of this 4th Sunday in Lent. So, I encourage you to read through it. But here's the "cliff notes" version, this Sunday, we find ourselves at the half-way point through our Lenten season.

In a way, I suppose I could have started with the infamous and fun insurance commercial that features a Camel walking through a workplace. Remember the Camel was excited and happy and asking each worker..."what day is it? Come on, you know what day is it? the answer of course is "hump Day"! Hump Day' refers to being half-way through or half-way there to the goal. In this case, this 4th Sunday in Lent is 21 days from Easter meaning we are able to see the 'light at the end of the tunnel'. So, it is truly our "*hump day Sunday*"!

Now, as we can see that we are close to realizing the end of this penitential journey, we 'rejoice'! Today we celebrate that we are able to rejoice in knowing that through Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, we know we are loved, forgiven, and raised to eternal life. A strength in joy may be the last thing many of us desire given the world around us. Expressing joy may not seem what we should be doing right now, especially as we prepare for Holy Week and as many of us find this period to be one of austerity, self-reflection, penance, and reconciliation.

And yet, we see today, there is a brightness to our Altar, there is a brightness in our song, and we rejoice. As Father Sam wrote in the bulletin, the word "Laetare" is from the Latin and means "to rejoice" and echoes Isaiah's prophetic scripture in Chapter 66: 10-11 when we read:

(10) Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her—

(11) that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

We see here a vision of a mother consoling us...a feminine perspective on God who is forgiving of us as we reaffirm our status as children of God. Hence, a reason that in the Anglican tradition in Great Britain, this Sunday is also called “mothering Sunday” or Mother’s Day. Of course, the mothering Sunday is really about returning to our place of Baptism – remembering that day when we became a member in the body of Christ. So today as mourners in Lent, one theologian inspires us to move into **the joy** as he’s written: *“Christian joy does not mean denying the existence of sorrow. Rather, Christian joy is our recognition that the world is meaningful, a space created for love rather than meaningless hatred or despair.”*

Even though we mourn and grieve loss of loved ones, of jobs, of the senseless acts of violence, of the loss of rights for our LGBTQ youth, of the war in the Ukraine, of the refugees caught between this war and safety...even as we are feeling and experiencing this grief, we **can choose** to have hope....we **can choose** to have our faith....we **can choose** to love our neighbors and our enemies as we love ourselves...we know we are redeemed by God’s Son...we know the power of faith...we know the power of resurrection.

As we begin with this rejoicing on “Rose Sunday”... on Laetare Sunday we now understand the message Luke’s Gospel brings to us. Do you see the rejoicing that comes from Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son? As a young person, I read, re-read, even acted out this Parable and yet what I had remembered being taught was that it was the focus on the sons and on celebrating what or who is now found! Somehow, I now know I had missed the metaphor that Jesus was teaching.

Today, as we study this Good News, I’m asking that we look at this Parable through the eyes of the Father. I believe I now understand that Jesus is telling this parable for my sake – that I need to focus on the actions of the Father - it’s all about the Father.

As I kept re-reading this Gospel, the message became clear – that the Father in the Parable is our role model for God -**our Father**. Perhaps many of you had already identified that and I may just be a little slower in the realization; but as I further studied this Parable- which by the way is only found in Luke- I now see it from a

changed perspective – it has taken on a new light for me, a new understanding. I like to think that’s what Jesus wants me to understand and that I’m really using my “holy listening” skills to hear the truth of this parable.

By using the story of the prodigal son, we can see that Jesus is aligning the sinners with the younger son and the pharisees, those protectors of the law, with the older son. The pharisees would not sit down with the sinners and just cannot rejoice in the one who is now found. They believe that only they know who is worthy; whereas Jesus sits down with and sees everyone, tax collectors, sinners alike as God’s children and welcomes ALL into the kingdom no matter imperfections and flaws.

Researching about the social traditions of the time, I learned that the father acquiescing to the younger son’s demands was not the norm. That would not have been done in most families, and yet, as in God’s family, we are given free will and choice. We can choose to leave with what we may perceive as our inheritance. The trials the younger son experiences lead him to understand that his actions have caused his despair and his only option for survival is to turn back to the father and family he left. How many times have we been *knocked for the proverbial loop* before we realize we have turned from God and not acted in a way that upholds our Baptismal Covenant or our role as following Jesus?

Now, as the younger son returns, he is remorseful and repentant and has no expectations of even being accepted on the land. Yet...we see his father running toward him with open arms, embracing him for returning having learned and turned from his sins. What a joy! The father just takes off running. What a time to celebrate the “coming home”. Again, in the research, the Father running toward him would not have been the norm...so then we see the metaphor here in that we know that God too, ‘runs to us’ – accepts us unconditionally with love, grace, and forgiveness. Wow, what an action! How does that **God “Hug”** feel? that feels good...right?

The second half of the story now spotlights the older son who has been constant and dedicated to his father, to his work on the farm and his place in the world. He only sees the ‘party’ and becomes jealous of this celebration. He feels he has been

slighted and not recognized for his contribution and steadfastness. And yet, here again, we see the father move to engage him – opening his arms to embrace him – coming to him which again is not the norm...and for his efforts, the father is rebuffed but while the story doesn't say, my guess is he continues to hold open his arms for the elder son. It's funny, one interpretation of this father-elder son interaction is that after listening to his elder son, he answers that he would not have denied the elder son a party, a celebration, since all he had to do is - ask since all that the father has, is also the son's.

What does that say about us? Do we wait to be acknowledged- WHY? do we wait to find our substance our identity from others – WHY? God knows our heart and as we are truly embraced by God...we do KNOW we are acknowledged, loved, redeemed too by our God – Father God-Mother God. In our case, Jesus is hoping we see here that we don't have to ask – the father is always willing, always there with and for us.

What does that mean for our Church today? Who do we see ourselves as? As the Younger son...as the elder son? I would offer that we are all prodigals...that we are worthy as children of God. We can celebrate our homecomings at every service! We can rejoice because we know God's love and the Beloved community which comes with our membership in the Jesus movement.

So, as we rejoice this Laetare Sunday and now understand the Father's rejoicing in this Gospel message, we can find the joy during this cycle of Lent. We can use today as our expression of rejoicing in the expectation of hope for our re-birth that is found through the glory of the resurrection. It is rejoicing in being "found" and embraced by God – hugged by God as we are embraced by the father in today's parable.

So, we can find the link between the joy in being halfway to the glory of the resurrection on this Laetare Sunday and Luke's Gospel message about the Prodigal Son Parable. We now can understand the role of the Father and we can rejoice with an outward sign. In the Anglican tradition, on this "mothering Sunday", the pink rose symbolizes the joy and the love and the achievement of being halfway through to Easter and the glory of the Resurrection.

A usual practice is to handout beautiful fresh roses to all as a remembrance of the joy we can feel, sense, and see. So yes today, we have a special gift for you. While I would love to have the real thing, my gift with plants only extends to cactus, so instead, we have for you a symbol like this handcrafted soft foam rose which will be a lasting reminder(*Show the rose*). And during the Offertory our very special assistants will make sure you receive one. Any extras will be left in the Narthex for you to take if you missed it or for us to send to anyone who is online with us and who will contact me directly.

And so, as we summarize and find our joy on this special day, as the father welcomed the son, so God in Christ welcomes us. That has implications for our lives as members of the Jesus movement and for the life of St. James. As we heard in the Epistle today, ‘we are ambassadors for Christ’ and as we live into our St. James’ mission of “Welcoming, Loving, and Serving All God’s Children” let us truly know the Joy! “Laetare”!

Amen.
