

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
4th Sunday of Lent, Year C
Mr. Kenneth Dotson, Preacher

Open our hearts so that we may love the love of Christ, open our lips that may proclaim the love of Christ, Amen.

Hello darkness, my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again,
Because a vision softly creeping,
Left its seeds while I was sleeping,
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence.

An internet search returns several interpretations to the lyrical meaning of the Simon and Garfunkel song The Sound of Silence originally recorded in 1963. In an interview Art Garfunkel once summed up the song's meaning as "the inability of people to communicate with each other.... And no, I'm not that old; it just that I've always been fascinated with the counterculture of the 60's.

As someone afflicted with an addiction the descent into darkness can lead to a silence that **prevents** the sound of love and support of those **unwilling** to give up on us. Perhaps you too are familiar with a loved one who struggles or has struggled with addiction. Experiencing the loss of a loved one in any number of ways can lead one down a path that seems hopeless, an unending spiral of decline that at times seems to have no end.

Not only do we stop communicating or engaging with those who care about us, we begin a process of withdrawing into ourselves. We shut God out of our lives; we deny the very one who can help us pull ourselves out of the darkness that surrounds us, the darkness that can permeate our very being. By failing to open our broken self up and reaching out to God, to family and community we stay within our own brokenness and we fail to see and feel the love of God, the love and support of family and of community. We can be so consumed within our darkness we do not realize the impact we have on our family and community. The loss is very real to those that care most about us. ***And what a very selfish act this can be!***

Our selfishness denies the members of the community the opportunity to share the burden of our pain and suffering. Our selfishness denies the community the opportunity to perform the joyous work of healing within our Christian faith and calling. The selfishness we demonstrate denies our family the opportunity to love and nurture us. And we deny ourselves of the very purpose of God, God's love, our community and our place in the God's Kingdom.

And yet the moment we laid bare our selfishness, the moment we laid bare our brokenness, the healing begins; we've "come to ourselves". The prodigal son in a moment of clarity came to himself and realized there was something better than living in isolation from the support of family and community. He was prepared to return to the fold even if it meant as a hired hand. The act of baring our soul and brokenness is liberating. Sharing my brokenness with the community here at St Andrew's lifted an enormous weight from me. It felt as if my burden was being carried by the community with me and at times for me. It began a healing process that continues to this day. It took faith in God, faith in Melisa, our community and faith in me.

Fortunately for some the seeds of faith planted in our mind, in our soul from a time before allow us to begin to see ourselves as God sees us. God knows the struggles we've been through; God knows when we are squandering his gifts to us. God gives us the freedom of choice. The option of choosing right or making the decision to fritter away the gift of life is ours, yet *God is faithfully and patiently waiting for us.*

In our Gospel reading this morning the father patiently and longingly waits for the return of his lost son. The effect of his son's absence is a broken heart, his family, his community is incomplete; the father is suffering from a real loss. The younger son has made the choice to take his gifts, his life, break from community and squander them away in decadent living, descending to the depths of darkness, a broken soul. He is in need of healing, his brokenness taking him to the point of desperation.

On the other hand, the older son lives within his self perceived notion of perfection. By not joining the family in celebration of the return of the younger son, he has effectively removed himself from the family and community. The older son feels his actions are justified. He has stayed home, worked hard like a slave and never asked for anything, never disobeyed his father. And in his self righteousness the older son has lost his sense of being part of the whole and risks alienating him self from the family, from the community.

Jesus' use of parables can and often provokes us into seeing the world through the lens of our *current state of faith or place in our spiritual journey.* What are we to discern or take away

from the Parable of the Prodigal Son? As the older son in my own family with a younger brother also afflicted with addiction I wondered how many times my parents were going to welcome our prodigal brother back home. It seemed as if there was no end to forgiveness and welcoming him back. Having left the family home at the age of 18 I began a life of self sufficiency. I worked hard, played hard and sought a life of achievement that exceeded what I had been exposed to while at growing up. After all who doesn't want to achieve more, to be more successful, at least I thought so. In time the tables were turned and I too became the prodigal son. And our father's, and mother's arms were waiting, waiting to embrace my return. My experience has changed my perception of the parable of the prodigal son. My perception or interpretation was turned upside down. I learned the lens in which my mind interpreted this parable is affected by my own journey through life, my faith and my spiritual journey.

During our journey of faith we are challenged to see ourselves and *others* through the eyes of God. Seeing ourselves, our own brokenness and shortcomings is simple enough. Coming to the realization and accepting that God sees these things in us and still loves and welcomes us is a joyous thing to know and realize. ~For failing to remember this we can find ourselves alone or isolated. Our faith in God's love *and* embracing the love of God and the support of our community is paramount to our survival.

In the earlier verses of this morning's Gospel we read that "the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling saying, this fellow welcomes the sinners and eats with them."

Jesus surrounded himself with the sinners, the tax collectors, the prodigals, if you will. It's important to remember Jesus *drew them* into community with him. The Pharisees and scribes remind us of the older brother. They lived by the law, they feel they are doing the right thing but do so within their own self-righteousness. They fail to see the need to be drawn into community with those of lesser circumstances.

The challenge of seeing all of society through the eyes of God becomes even larger within the context of these verses. God didn't see them any differently than God sees you or I, why then should we? We must ask ourselves, ~during the course of our journey in life, when or where have we found ourselves in the role of the prodigal child or the older sibling? When have we squandered our gifts, or judged those who do not live the life we do? God doesn't change the way God sees us. God doesn't stop forgiving us. God is always watching for us, patiently waiting to bring us back.

We're not given a happily ever after ending to the story in today's Gospel. We don't know if the prodigal son mended his ways and remained at home or if the older son realized his

perceived perfection was an imperfection. What we do know is the father lovingly forgave his sons, *both of them*. The healing begins when we come to ourselves and when we share our brokenness our community is strengthened and made whole again. Amen