

3/30/2025 - Trinity Episcopal Church Santa Barbara - Lent 4

Sermon Written by: Theo Patterson

Loving Father, form us into champions of your abundant compassion. Amen.

*Please be seated.*

Coach Erie called out over the splash of waves and the chatter of the other swimmers clustered on the wall: “You’ve all worked very hard this week and I hear there is a dolphin dollar store ready for you!” Despite being exhausted from practice, I excitedly heaved my eleven year old body onto the pool deck to join the bubbling excitement around a table of toys, baked goods, and candy: The DOLPHIN DOLLAR STORE.

Every summer growing up, I participated in my neighborhood swim team: The South Irvine Dolphins. Being located in Orange County, which is home to more Olympians than just about any other county in the United States, meant that a summer swim league was not just a fun little neighborhood activity, but a ruthless bracket of teams vying for the coveted championship title of the summer. After all, being on a successful summer team meant you were more likely to improve on your club team during the year, and then hopefully make it to Olympic trials after high school. By age 11, I had already tasted victory - literally- when I went to a swim practice with four-time Olympic gold medalist Jason Lezak. After he gave us technique and training tips, he let us bite the edge of one of his gold medals during an after-practice photoshoot. It’s a memory that I will never forget.

In addition to training with legends, the Dolphin Dollar store also helped cultivate our competitive team spirit. Every Friday, after steadily earning one dolphin dollar after each practice, we were rewarded with a spread of cookies, water guns, stickers, and most popular of all, the chewy gummy candy called Hi-Chew. It was a jubilant marketplace where the tannest kids who swam the most were the top buyers and everyone else took home one or two prizes, with a renewed sense of resolve. The encouragement to work hard was so clear that kids often dramatically fanned out their Dolphin Dollars every Friday like they were made of pure gold.

The lesson of hard work we learned on those summer Fridays helped caution us against laziness and motivated us towards accomplishing our goals. The Dolphin Dollar Store was effective in this regard. However, underlying this system was a subtle assumption that wasn't as virtuous. Just like the kids who were flexing their excess Dolphin Dollars, hard work can sometimes lead us to believe that we are inherently more deserving of love and recognition than others. In today's Gospel reading: the Parable of the Loving Father, Jesus refutes these assumptions by demonstrating God's love for all people, flowing from divine grace rather than human achievement.

At the same time that I was a young swimmer in Irvine, I heard this Bible story referred to as "the Parable of the Prodigal Son." As Luke's gospel recounts the tale, Jesus had been slumming it with the underdogs and undesirables while the devout, holier-than-thou, religious elites of the day were trying to discredit him for doing so. In response, Jesus tells three parables. Our Trinity students reflected on these parables recently in preparation for the Eucharist Retreat, and they noted that "in all three: something is lost, it is then found again, and then there is a celebration!" The Trinity students' reflections bring up an interesting question: How do we name these three

parallel teachings? Should we focus on what was lost and found in each story: a sheep, a coin, and the sons? Or do we focus on God as the seeker in each story? At the church I grew up in, the focus was exclusively kept on what was lost, and in the case of the Prodigal Son, the older brother was downplayed or even erased to keep the focus on the younger son's individual example of personal transformation. Here at Trinity, we prefer to focus on God as the seeker in each story, dubbing the parables: the Good Shepherd, the Diligent Woman, and the Loving Father, respectively.

As with all parables, it is important to remember the limitations of symbolic representation. God as the Loving Father in today's story does not mean that God is male. We must look no further than the two adjacent parables to be reminded that Jesus also chooses to represent the image of the Divine in the feminine Diligent Woman and the gender-neutral representation of the Good Shepherd. With these contextual guideposts in mind, let's take a closer look at these two brothers in the Parable of the Loving Father.

Traditionally, in addition to sometimes erasing the older brother, interpretations of this story can be detrimentally simplified to "younger son = good; older son = bad." This simplification blinds us to how both sons fall prey to the same logic that I mentioned earlier. It could be called works-righteousness, or meritocracy, or simply "work hard, follow the rules, and be rewarded." The lavish generosity of the Loving Father is evident from the beginning of the story when he grants a premature inheritance to the younger son, which by the way would be tantamount to saying "F you, I wish you were dead," in the cultural context of the day. But despite both brothers seeing this example of loving generosity from their Father, they do not live as if it were really true.

The younger son sets off, shirking responsibility, and looking out only for himself after being unfathomably disrespectful to his Loving Father and the rest of his family. He squanders the money and ends up the lowest of the low, a dirty, unkosher pig farmer. At this point, after living selfishly and lazily, the brother has seemingly internalized that his worth is dependent upon how poorly he behaved. Slowly, and with a lot of penitent self-hatred, he returns to his Loving Father. Before he can perform his carefully rehearsed speech of self-deprecation, however, he is caught up in the rush of a running, all consuming embrace that shatters the lies he had believed about himself. The Loving Father's abundance cannot be earned, and especially not by penitent, self-flaggelating, (dare I say) religious acts of piety. This is a poignant reminder for our Lenten journey which can sometimes slip into its own Olympic tournament of self-imposed suffering.

Meanwhile, the older brother is buying into the same logic in a different setting. He is where he has always been, by his Father's side, doing the absolute MOST BEST PERFECT job that anyone possibly could. He never skips a day of work in the fields, never hesitates to help the Father when requested, and he even works harder than the slaves most days! After obediently working so hard, the older brother naturally knows that he is deserving of his Father's love, well because of course he is! As the months pass, his smug self-righteousness builds, until it erupts when faced with a lavish display of compassion that denies the lie of his self-made superiority. Once again, the Loving Father's abundance is not earned, and especially not by relentless striving to please others while denying ourselves any rest or celebration. In all the months his brother was away, he apparently didn't ask for a single party with his friends. Was this life of puritanical self-denial rooted in the abundant love of his Father?

Our adult formation series this Lent is on poetry and scripture and I was reminded of a short poem that beautifully encapsulates the response of the Loving Father to both his sons. It is called Wild Geese by Mary Oliver and it goes like this:

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

For a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

Love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain

Are moving across the landscapes,

Over the prairies and the deep trees,

The mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,

Are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

The world offers itself to your imagination,

Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –

Over and over announcing your place

In the family of things.

How foreign it is to suggest this other way, that every person and creature, simply by virtue of being born in God's grace, is fully deserving already. As Mary Oliver puts it, "You do not have to be good to belong in the family of things." This is not an encouragement to do evil, but rather permission to give oneself radical compassion in the face of a real and messy life.

In our world today, there is an urgent imperative to internalize the kind of compassion and abundance that the Loving Father offers to his sons. We are bombarded by an American hustle culture built on cutthroat Capitalism. Societal expectations constantly lie to us that we must work hard to be deserving of acceptance, love, or even in extreme cases, our human rights. We are reminded that efficiency is prized above all else and that taking time away should cause us guilt. Increasingly, we must prove ourselves, like when we are required to email 5 things we accomplished this week so we don't lose our livelihood. All the while, we are told that the billionaires somehow earned their engorging wealth, deserving it as a result of entirely their own merit. These lies cannot stand before the abundance of the Loving Father, who reminds us that all wealth is a collaborative gift from community, the Earth, and ultimately from God.

Yet another dire picture of our societal addiction to belonging predicated on achievement can be seen in the recent widespread rollbacks of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, or DEI policies. This crusade against DEI programs is built upon the myth that everyone starts at the same place and so everyone should work equally hard for a seat at the table. But we know that the realities of redlining, poverty, and mass incarceration, just to name a few, are very different starting places that disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and other Communities of Color giving them more difficult work to overcome. In the face of these DEI rollbacks, I take hope in

the example of the Black Church which has led a faithful resistance this Lent with a boycott of businesses like Target and others which have dropped their DEI policies at the first hint of unpopularity at the federal level. Intentionally valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion helps us amend institutional injustices, reminding us that everyone is worthy of belonging, everyone's work has value, and everyone deserves a seat at the table.

When I reflect back on it now, it is funny to me how the Dolphin Dollar Store parodied the achievement-based competition of our adult world so closely, while also simultaneously reminding me of a truth we can be quick to forget. Despite my faithful attendance, hard work, and careful saving, it was of course, the parents and families of our team who generously stocked the store week after week. They provided all these goodies to everyone, the star swimmers and stragglers alike, without expectation of any financial repayment. God's love is the same way. I imagine the Loving Father laughing kindly as we trot out the dolphin dollars of our own lives, hoping we have enough for a small treat. Opening his scar-borne hands, he smiles and reminds us that just like our hardworking neighbors, our less than hardworking neighbors, yes, our enemies, and even the wild geese who are flying home high above, we are welcome to the feast because we have a place in the family of all things. Amen.