

Sermon: Underappreciated Human Doings**Scripture: Luke 15: 1-32****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: September 12, 2010**

I thought it was fitting that the lectionary had us reading the parable of the prodigal son on this my first Sunday back after 3 great months of “squandering my life in reckless living”! And I highly recommend such squandering. It’s better than therapy, really, taking the time to slow down, not have anything you have to be getting to, breathing more deeply and being more fully, playing music and cards with the kids, going out on dates with your wife, seeing new things, experiencing new landscapes, submerging into a different culture, striking up conversations with strangers, hearing great music, and so on and so forth. Ah, reckless living!

One of the many things such recklessness offers is that it quiets the mind and spirit enough so you can better hear the voice of the soul, and it can be surprising to hear at times what the soul has to say. That was a significant experience of this sabbatical of mine - being surprised at what my soul had to say to me and wanting to say “really? Is that right? Are you serious?” Things about myself and my life that I had only previously heard whisperings of; insights into some perennial questions, understandings around some nagging doubts, clarifying of desires, insights into interior struggles, a lot surfacing simply because I was calm and still long enough for them to surface.

I realize it is truly a privilege in this world to be able to take 3 months off of work to listen more closely to the promptings of the soul, assuming, we really want to hear what our deeper selves have to say. There are many many people struggling to make ends meet who could never afford such space and time. However, I call it a privilege and not a luxury because to call it a luxury suggests that it’s something we don’t really need but it’s really nice to have, while sabbath and sabbatical, after having taken one now, strikes me profoundly as something we really do need if our goal is spiritual growth and human thriving. The Hebrew people were really onto something with this whole notion of Sabbath taking. We are built in such a way that we need the time to stop and breath and rest, even for an extended period of time, just as we need food and water and air to survive and we dismiss such time as luxury at our own peril I’m afraid.

One of the things that we do when we take sabbath or sabbatical is that we let go of our closely measured control over what we are doing and we inevitably let go of the illusions that we are critical to the functioning of the world, even our little world, and we realize that the world gets along quite well enough without us. I mean, wow, the church is still going and thriving, even without me running around doing all the things that I am certain are so important for me to be doing! And wow, people still worshipped God all summer even without me leading them! And “oh, my goodness, the budget is still doing just fine...” ok, well, that’s one we need to work on, but you know what I mean. When we step off the tread-mill, we are reminded of our place in the economy of things, which really, if we are honest, is a pretty small place. The world actually holds together pretty well on its own. And sometimes, if you are anything like me, you can fall beneath the heaviness of all the weight that you have decided you need to hold, whether anyone else has given it to us to hold or not and it’s a temptation that can lead us to be quite dour and austere under the weight of that important responsibility.

And so it seems to me that I’ve learned there might be worse things than at times giving ourselves permission to “squander our lives on reckless living”. It just might not be too bad an idea to take the time and space we need to hear what that soul voice inside of us has to say to a question like: “what are you doing here?” There could be worse things than losing control a bit and giving ourselves to feeling little lost and listless, even unproductive for a while. In fact in our scripture this morning it sure seems that such a thing actually is being commended to us.

Don’t we all want to be celebrated for who we are? Don’t we all want parties thrown in our honor? Well, what we assume is that if we work hard enough and do all the right things at all the right times and race real hard to be the best we can be then we can get one of those parties and be celebrated for all we do. But in God’s kingdom, in this world as viewed through God’s eyes we might say, it seems that rather than doing all the right things, that being utterly lost – the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost prodigal son – being lost is the pre-requisite for the party. And of the three parables that Susan read, the only loser in the any of the scenarios was the one character who was working so hard to do all the right things at all the right times in all the right ways – the eldest brother.

This story strikes me as the male version of the Martha and Mary story that tends to irk a lot of women. In that story it's Mary who is sitting at Jesus' feet who is affirmed and Martha who is working so hard in the kitchen with no help whatsoever from Mary who is chastised for having any feelings about it. And we all kind of feel for Martha and don't blame her at all for feeling a bit resentful of Mary, don't we, and that's because we all know what it feels like to have everything we are doing go unappreciated, right? Let's see: raise your hand please if you have ever in your life felt unappreciated! I wouldn't believe it if you said any different! It's just one of those things that goes along with being human is being quite certain that you are being under-appreciated for all you are doing. We aren't merely human beings we are Underappreciated Human Doings, actually. And the 2000 year old gospel story of Martha and Mary is told so masterfully that it always has and always will trigger that part of ourselves I think. And the Prodigal Son is the traditionally male version of that same story which also triggers many of us, male and female, in the same way, right? That eldest brother standing there seething at the door of this huge party that has been thrown for his selfish, insolent, reckless brother; after all the hard work and commitment and responsibility that he has taken upon himself for the care of the land and the farm. Doesn't it do the same thing, as you think about it, it just taps all of our Underappreciated Human Doing buttons.

“But I work so hard! I never take a holiday! I am so busy! I serve on all the committees I am asked to serve on! I want a party thrown for MMEEEEEE, BLAST IT!!!!”

“Ok, ok, geez, we'll throw you a party then.”

“NOOOOOO! I don't want a party thrown because I'm telling you to throw me a party and am having a tantrum about it, I want a party thrown in pure and spontaneous love and appreciation for all I do around here!!!”

And we laugh because we know that voice and know that inside us there is that little tantrum throwing kid who just really wants more than anything to be assured that he is loved... and there's that little girl who has been working so hard in hopes that someone might notice her and appreciate her... and the sad thing is, the tragedy is that in all his or her desperate doing and grasping for being noticed and appreciated that all this internal static electricity is created, all this interior white noise which then obscures that place just

below the surface where the soul resides. And it's there in that place where a delicate and exquisite communication is going on between each of our souls and God and God is saying something like: "there are not enough people and music and party-favors in the world to throw the kind of party that I want to throw to express my love for you. So I chose to enter into all the static and rush and violence of your world and submit to suffering and finally death to express my love for you... hoping that this you could best hear beneath all the other static." And the soul says "oh, really?" And God says "really!"

On the Isle of Iona there stands this 15 foot beautiful stone celtic cross, St. Martin's Cross, which was carved and erected in the 9th century, over 1,100 years ago. It is a beautiful thing to behold. Each night that we were on Iona there was a 9pm prayer service in the amazing grand stone Abbey sanctuary. As the service was ending, about 9:45 one night, still plenty of light in mid-July, we were told to go immediately outside to catch a beautiful sight. And so we all left the sanctuary and walked out into the glowing light of the setting sun which lit up the whole island in a beautiful red, but as I rounded the corner and breathed deeply in the night air I looked over towards St. Martin's cross and there in the light evening sky behind the cross was this most amazing arcing rainbow, incredibly vivid, splashed against the intermittent clouded and blue sky and we all just stood there entranced. I don't even think I was fully conscious of it in the moment, but as I recall it in my memory, there is this heavy dramatic stone cross rising out of the earth and just behind it this incredibly delicate, ephemeral, but grand expression of beauty sweeping across the heavens. And I think if we are calmed and still for long enough that's something of the nature of what we will discover imprinted in our very souls: that ancient and profound image of love expressed through death opening out into an unfathomable, beautiful, and infinite sky.