

OPENING:

To address, first, the (pink) “elephant in the room.”

Today is Laetare Sunday and Laetare means “Rejoice” in Latin.

It's also sometimes known as Rose Sunday, this 4th Sunday in Lent, the Sunday in the season that the Church gives us a break, a rest during this long penitential slog.

That's why I am wearing this Pink.

Historically the Church also sometimes called it: “Refreshment Sunday” because even weddings were allowed, for the only time in Lent on this Sunday.

We did not have a wedding here at St. Timothy's but we did have a quinceañera here last night, that beautiful, religious, and cultural custom in Latino culture for a young woman's 15th birthday.

To top it all off, today, we get the Parable of the Prodigal Son, one of the most beloved and powerful in all of Scripture.

It's all such a grand party, a celebration, even our outside campus reflects the gorgeous, colorful beauty.

I am going to go in another direction with my sermon though, and move away from this glorious pink, and head down towards the brown slop of the story, down with the pigs and into the trough.

MANURE:

Before I do that, I want to return briefly to last week's story.

To say one more thing about the fig tree. (Peach!)

We ended last week, with Jesus saying:

“Don't cut down this fig tree, let it grow, and see what happens.”

But Jesus does not end there, he also says:

“Put manure around it. Fertilize the fig tree with dung.”¹

Biblical commentators are “scataphobic” (I learned a new word!) about that and we gloss over it as well.²

The spiritual lesson here, moving from agriculture to faith, is that **ONLY** by recognizing our earthliness, our earthiness, our dirtiness,

That **ONLY** by remembering that we are but black/ brown dust (and to dust we shall return) do we grow and **LIVE**.

¹ John 13:8-9

² Deffenbaugh, Daniel. “Theological Perspective” (Luke 13.1-9) in *Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Volume 2), 96.

The vineyard owner in the story would prefer to have a pristine vineyard, but Jesus says: “wait a second with that fig tree, let’s put some manure on it and see what happens.”

SLOP:

That brings us to the Story of the Prodigal Son and the pigs

You could call it the Story of Two Brothers, Or the Parable of the Forgiving Father. Or maybe the Tale of the Idiot Brother, who, as the expression goes, has ‘really stepped into it.’

At first, the younger brother has it all, he has his youth, he has his inheritance in hand, he has got it made, he is out from underneath his aging father’s and his annoying brother’s holding him back.

He heads out and has a technicolor, radiant time enjoying that inheritance. And he ends up in the pig trough.

Now, when we read the Prodigal Son story in the Cowherd household, it’s not the wonderful climax of the story, the father forgiving the son, that my own child likes the best.

He likes the *pigs*, specifically that image of the younger son in the trough.

I am not exactly sure why. We have been to Frying Pan Farm enough to know what a pig sty looks and smells and feels like.

The hunger that must possess someone to stick your face in the offal, the dung, the manure, to eat alongside the swine.

And, in Jewish culture, because of the dietary laws, this story is further supposed to depict someone hitting something lower than low.

What has happened to the younger son?

He has hit rock bottom, he has sunk to the worst imaginable.

In so many words, he has died.

The realization reminds me of what someone once said about his decision to finally attend Alcoholics Anonymous. The person realized:

“This was my best of intentions. My best plans got me here at AA. Me doing exactly what I wanted: ‘I have ended up in a church basement, with bad fluorescent lighting, on uncomfortable chairs, drinking weak coffee, surrounded by other

addicts.”

The younger son could have said the same thing:

I have followed my own devices, and I am at the trough with the swine.

GOOD NEWS

The good news for the younger son, the good news for the Fig Tree, the good news for you and me, is that where God says:

I can work with that.

A drunk holding a Styrofoam cup filled with coffee-flavored water, let's heal him.

A profligate would-be entrepreneur with a drained bank account and some Daddy issues, let's party.

A screaming baby that cannot possibly know the difference between salvation and sin, let's baptize her.

A group of middling fishermen in a no-name province of the Empire, let's ordain them.

A Church with declining attendance and aging buildings, let's Resurrect it.

All those browns and beiges and dull color palettes, the stink of death, the smell of dung. God says: sounds like a perfect recipe for rebirth, for rising from the dead.

Robert Farrar Capon, this author that I love, goes this far with it:

“By the folly of the cross, Jesus becomes sin for us, and he goes outside the camp for us, and he is relegated to the dump for us, and he becomes garbage and compost, offal and manure for us. And then he comes to us... with own body dug deep by nails and spears, and his own being made dung by his death, and he sends our roots resurrection. (Like the father in our story) he does not come to use if we are good: he comes to disturb the caked conventions by which we pretend to be good.

... On no conditions, because like the dung of death he digs into our roots, he is too dead to insist on prerogatives. We are saved gratis, by grace. We do nothing and we deserve nothing; it is all, absolutely and without qualification, one huge, hilarious gift.”³

BORN AGAIN:

This Sunday has another name for it. (There are a lot of names for this Sunday, if you are counting: Laetare/ Rose/ Refreshment.)

It's also called “Mothering Sunday” because it's when the Church back in the day in England would allow servants and workers to go visit... their mothers. OR

³ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 250-1.

Baptism.

So it's beautiful, you would get the day off, and you were supposed to go visit your mother.

If you are doing your math, it's also 9 months from Christmas, so there was some Mary stuff going on, and now it's kind of the British counterpart to Mother's Day in the United Kingdom.

In the Prodigal Son, we hear a lot about Fathers, but not a lot about Mothers.

This directive, though, to return to your mothers..... we have heard that somewhere, I think?

Jesus talks about that too. (He does not mind talking not only about all sorts of scatological but also anatomically unmentionable things.)

Mothering Sunday says we should go back to our mothers.

Jesus says, in order to enter into the Kingdom of God, you must be born again.

People make him say it, spell it out: "Does that mean I need to enter into the womb of my mother?"

Jesus says: "Yes, you need to die and be born again."

And Jesus says that he is going to do exactly that.

Before that, he tells us this unforgettable story about returning to the womb of your father. The deep meaning of the "return of the prodigal son" is a return to God's womb, the return to the very origins of our being, this idea that there is no place so impossible that God can save us from.⁴

Do we really need to die in order to live? Can we really enter the womb again. With these questions: Is he being literal? Is he being metaphorical?

The answer, of course, is "yes" to both.

We are dense though, so we need the reminder.

So we put Ashes on her foreheads once a year.

We need the reminder, so we dim the lights in Lent, with this one week reprieve, this color clash to remind us of the possibilities with God.

The color palette is not always attractive to us, but it is always to God, always worthy of redemption and healing. And it always ends with light, the burst of light that Easter provides, that the celebration in our story describes.

Until then, I will leave with you this quote from

Our wounds have a way of becoming a **womb** "in which God's new creation can be birthed." ~ Julian of Norwich **AMEN**

⁴ [Same Old Song: Bonus Episode: Crafting a Gospel-Focused Sermon for Lent \(fireside.fm\)](https://fireside.fm/same-old-song-bonus-episode-crafting-a-gospel-focused-sermon-for-lent)