



Sermon

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C

March 30, 2025

2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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The Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan says, “I don’t know who discovered water, but it wasn’t the fish.” Rabbi Steve Leder quotes in this a conversation he has on a podcast with Kate Bowler, an author, teacher, and speaker who some of us have read before.¹ The rabbi brings this up to point out that, ironically, a fish is the only one who doesn’t know about water, because the fish is born in water, lives in water, swims in water, dies in water...Water is all that the fish knows, but yet couldn’t tell you that water exists. However, when the fish is jerked out of the water, reeled on a hook, wriggling around...then the fish realizes that there is water. As soon as the fish is out of water and in great need of it, then the fish can tell you exactly what and where water is and what it’s for.

The rabbi brings up this quote and story to say that so often it is disruption, it is when we’re pulled like a fish out of water, when we are uncomfortable and in pain and need—that is when we learn. The rabbi is so bold to say that “disruption is the only thing that [can teach] us anything,” that “pain is the only teacher,” that “death is the only teacher”: looking at and acknowledging the reality of death and our dying changes us, and sometimes it is the only or one of the only things that can.

The rabbi questions, “Is this [learning] worth it?” He says “no.” He asks, “Is it worthless?” He says “no.” This teaching and learning by pain and grief, disruption and even death, is not worth it—none of us would say so—but it is not also worth-less. He also quips as he’s talking with Kate Bowler, “When you’re going through hell, don’t come back empty-handed,” suggesting that when we are in hell (and notice he says “when”: we will all experience discomfort and pain, disruption and, yes, death; we will all experience deep need), be open to change. This is not to say, “Put on a happy face,” this is not to say “There is a reason for everything,” this is not to say any of those platitudes—none of them are true. It is to say that when there, we can change. When there, change is possible.

Paul is writing today to the Corinthians, this community of early Christians in the decades after Jesus’ life and ministry and death and resurrection. Paul and those around him are

¹ “Don’t Come Out Empty Handed”, conversation with Kate Bowler and Rabbi Steve Leder, *Everything Happens* podcast, Season 10, Episode 7, April 4, 2023: katebowler.com/podcasts/dont-come-out-empty-handed/

wrestling with who Jesus is in their lives. He is known by some in that community, he is a friend of a friend, there is only a couple of degrees of separation in that church in Corinth. All of them have experienced tremendous disruption: their rabbi, their friend, their friend's friend lived an incredible life, and he died impossibly. And after his death, they experienced him somehow, and are trying to make sense of what this means, this disruption and grief that they are all enduring together. Paul has written at least one other letter to them (he likely wrote several; there are two that remain, and this is the second one) where he, Paul, like Rabbi Leder, essentially encourages them not to come back empty-handed. In their grief, trauma, and disruption, might they be open to change? Might they release themselves from looking for some logic or reason, but to be open to be, as he says, "a new creation"?

When you go through a change as deep and profound as this, Paul says, there is no way to not be changed; you will be changed; we are, he says to his community, changed. This, in his words, is not a bad thing, it is not the end of the story or their story; there is, in what they are going through, something new happening. They are fish out of water, and they are discovering who they really are and whose they really are.

Paul teaches them to belong to each other as they already belong to God. God reaches out to them and to us constantly. We are invited to respond to this invitation, to this "reconciliation" and restoration, in Paul's words, that is ongoing in God. We are invited to respond to this invitation anew. We may have run from it before, we may have distanced ourselves, we may have rejected it outright, and now, Paul says, today, and the next day, and the next day, each is an invitation and an opportunity to change.

Jesus finds himself today talking with a large group gathered around him, as is so often the case. They are confused about how he is spending his time, how he would welcome sinners and even eat with them. Jesus tells them three parables; we hear the third today. Right before this come the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost sheep, where how people (in those parables) spend their time and resources, and their understanding of who they are, are called into question, and are quite shocking, actually.

Jesus begins this parable in a familiar fashion—many scriptural stories begin in this way: "There was a man who had two sons." The younger of them goes off, runs away, and makes a number of poor decisions. When he hits rock bottom, when he has no money to his name, there was famine in the land where he was, there was nothing to eat, and he had nothing in his own possession. He is in that moment the fish out of water, where so much that he had taken for granted, so much that he had known as familiar and true, were out of his hands. He is in deep need: what he has known is deeply disrupted, and he is incredibly hungry.

He is out working among the pigs and he thinks, "I wish I could just eat the pods that they're eating—I would do that." There is another piece of rabbinical wisdom that says, "When one is ready to eat the carob pods, one is ready to change."²

² Paraphrased from a proverb in the rabbinic commentary *Leviticus Rabbah* (13.4): "When Israelites are reduced to eating carob pods, they repent," quoted by Amy-Jill Levine in *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 57.

The younger son, this fish out of water, suddenly and desperately knows what he needs and whose he is, and he decides to turn back home. He has a speech in his head that he's going to say, but he barely gets it out before his dad shows up. His dad has seen him coming over the horizon and runs out to meet him, embraces him with a huge hug. The son is about to ask for bread, but the father bursts, "We're going to have a *party*! We're going to kill the fatted calf and we are going to *feast*, because you were dead and you are alive, you were lost and you are found."

The son had anticipated that his father's reception and love for him, if the father had any love for him left at all, would be logical and transactional. The son cannot imagine his father's reaction and reception, that he would show and share love with everything that he has in a most extravagant, surprising, and moving way. The son has realized how desperate he is for his father's love—when apart from it, he sees it for what it is—only to find that, like fish in water, that love has been there the whole time.

In our times of deepest need and disruption, when things happen that we do not ask for and do not want, we might be shocked into the realization that the love of God is so near, it has been there all the time. Just like a fish doesn't know what water is because it's been born in it and lives in it and it's all it knows, so, too, it can be so hard to see and recognize and accept the love of God, because we, too, are born in it and live in it and it's all we know; it's all there is.

In closing I offer a blessing—a blessing meaning not a platitude, not a rationale, not a naming of happiness when there is not, but like the rabbi's words that we might not be "empty-handed". Kate Bowler, his conversation partner in this podcast, has written a whole book of blessings for those times when we are in deep need, when things happen that we do not want or expect. How then do we name and hold out the possibility of God's love? In a book called *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*, she writes this blessing "For the Life You Didn't Choose"³:

*Blessed are you
when the shock subsides,
when vaguely, you see a line appear
that divides before and after.*

*You didn't draw it,
and can barely even make it out.
But as surely as minutes add up to
hours and days,
here you are,*

³ Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie, "For the Life You Didn't Choose" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days* (New York: Convergent Books, 2023), 188-189, included in *The Hardest Part: Hurt We Carry, Hope We Find* sermon guide for Lent 2025 by Kate Bowler and the Everything Happens Project, katebowler.com.

*forced into a story
you never would have written.*

*Blessed are you in the tender place
of awe and dread,
wondering how to be whole
when dreams have disappeared
and part of you with them,
where mastery, control,
determination, bootstrapping,
and grit
are consigned to the realm
of Before
(where most of the world lives),
in the fever dream that promises
infinite choices,
unlimited progress, best life now.*

*Blessed are we in the After zone,
loudly shouting:
Is there anybody here?
We hear the echo,
the shuffle of feet,
the murmur of others
asking the same question,
together in knowledge
that we are far beyond
what we know.*

*God, show us a
glimmer of possibility
in this new constraint,
that small truths will be given
back to us.
We are held.
We are safe.
We are loved.
We are loved.
We are loved.*

Amen.