

March 30, 2025
The Fourth Sunday of Lent
Year C
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Ending

As you hopefully know, Emmanuel restarted its book group this year. What inspired this new/restarted book group was my reading habits. I used to think that I didn't read much or didn't read enough but then it occurred to me that the audiobooks I listen to almost all the time count as reading. If you count those, I read all the time—in the car, when I'm getting ready in the morning, while I'm eating breakfast, doing laundry or other household tasks, while I'm sewing quilts for Lutheran World Relief. It's almost constant. I walk through life surrounded by stories, by books. And in some of those books, fiction though they are, take me into the presence of God. They seem to be telling God stories, faith stories, whether the author intended them to be or not.

We started the book group with a non-fiction book, but that didn't seem to go very well, it was considered to be too intense for an hour-long discussion, so we have switched to fiction books.

So far, the fiction books we have read and have had lively conversations about are:

The Measure

I Heard the Owl Call My Name

Anxious People

and

Mystic Tea

In April we're going to be reading *The Berry Pickers* if you'd like to join us.

On my own, using my library audiobook app, I've read/listened to 13 books this year, but I have to be honest, there have been quite a few that I haven't enjoyed. There have even been a couple that I've returned without finishing, once I realized and gave myself permission to stop reading a book I wasn't enjoying. There have been some others that I've muddled through and not gotten much out of.

Sometimes it feels like I've seen God waving me from the pages of a completely secular book, as in some of the books that we've read in Book Group, but that hasn't happened much with my reading this year. That is, until I read a book by an author my sister got me hooked on this year. This was the third book by the author that I've listened to this year, and probably my favorite, although I really enjoyed the other two as well. It was my favorite, because, whether it was the author's intention or not, I found God, to at least one of God's stories lurking in the 496 pages of the story.

The book is *Long Bright River* by Liz Moore and apparently, it's also been made into a miniseries on Peacock, although I haven't watched it yet. I might not watch it, as I'm often disappointed by attempts to make movies or television series out of books I've really liked. We'll see.

Long Bright River is about two sisters, Mickey and Casey, one a police officer and one a drug addict and sometimes prostitute. The church is mentioned a few times in it but only in terms of its decline.

The sisters in the story were raised in a nominally Roman Catholic household, but more in terms of a cultural connection than any actual religious commitment or feeling. In their childhood, the church, their neighborhood parish had a big influence over the lives of the people in their community, even if it was mostly cultural.

The book switches between Mickey and Casey's childhoods and adolescence and their adulthood and in their adulthood many of the churches in their community have been shuttered and the buildings are condemned and crumbling.

Even the church they attended as children, while it is still open, is mostly empty and starting to look abandoned. The building is far too big for the number of parishioners who attend worship in it.

One of the final scenes of the book takes place in an abandoned church building, where homeless people and addicts have taken over the space and are using it for shelter. I hope that we read this book in book group sometimes so that we can talk more about the role the church plays in the community that the book is set in. But the mentions of church buildings, abandoned or not is not why I'm telling you about this book in today's sermon.

The reason I'm telling you about the book is because to me, it was a retelling of today's gospel reading, the Prodigal Son parable, the Forgiving Father parable, the Unforgiving Brother parable, or whatever other name you choose to call it. I'm guessing that's not what the author was thinking about when she wrote the book, but somehow it seeped in there and as the book was drawing to a close the connections seemed to jump off the pages.

I'm going to try to explain without giving too much about the book away, trying to avoid spoilers, in case you want to read it or in case we read it in book group.

The parable in today's gospel reading starts with these words, "There was a man who had two sons..."

In *Long Bright River* a man had two daughters, a woman had two daughters, a grandmother was left to raise two granddaughters.

There were two daughters, two sisters, Mickey and Casey and they took very different paths in their lives.

Mickey was the older sister, smart, sensitive, shy, responsible, and very determined to make something of her life, despite the way that life was stacked against her. She was often the caretaker of her little sister.

Casey was the younger sister, also smart, super outgoing, friend, popular, who, early in her life got involved with drugs and partying and fell down the rabbit hole of addiction.

Casey became an addict. Mickey became a police officer. They both walked the same streets, but for very different reasons.

The book is told from Mickey's perspective, during a time when Casey is missing and there is more than usual violence on the streets Casey calls home and Mickey patrols.

The plot of the story is Mickey's search for Casey, while she also tries to solve the mystery of who is killing young women in the community that she is supposed to keep safe. Of course, she is worried that the vanished Casey has become one of the victims of the mystery killer.

The bias of the book is that Mickey is the hero, the savior, the rescuer or at least the avenger of her sister.

Mickey is the one who has done everything right, of course. Gotten as much of an education as she could under her circumstances, become a police officer. Has a stable home, a mostly stable life, although she too had experienced some significant bumps along her road. The older sister, the responsible one. She could very easily have said to the world, to her community, the words of the older brother in today's parable:

Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him! (Luke 15:29-30)

Casey, on the other hand, since she was a teenager, had been messing things up, drugs, crime, jail, rehab, relapse a never-ending cycle. She didn't have a father or a family from whom she could take half of an inheritance, but she certainly used up everything she had in dissolute living. She was like the younger brother in today's parable.

I must admit, throughout the book I was rooting for Mickey, I admired her for her dedication to her sister and for her commitment to figuring out what happened to her, and I was frustrated with Casey, not least because of what she put her sister through.

It seemed very clear to me that Mickey was the hero in the book and Casey was, if not the villain than the victim, because you have to have some compassion for what she went through, the trap she had fallen into as a very young person from which it seemed that there was no escape.

Now is the tricky part of this sermon because I want to tell you what happened without telling you what happened. You know, no spoilers. But first, let's talk some more about the parable.

In the parable the younger son comes back, repentant, and the father welcomes him back into the home, the family, without a moment's question or hesitation. Then there is a celebration.

But the older son, the older brother, who had been responsible and faithful all his life, is furious that the father is throwing a celebration for the younger son, who had abandoned the family, followed none of the family's or society's rules, and had left him to do all of the work on the farm.

I think the older brother thought that he should be the hero of the story and instead the younger brother is the one being celebrated.

But the father's love was for both of them, for his lost and wayward son, who had come home as well as for the son who had been home all along. The father's love was not a limited commodity, he could give it all to both of his sons.

The question that is raised by the parable is, could they love each other? More specifically, could the older brother, the older son, find a place in his heart to love, as an equal, his brother who had followed none of the rules, who had hurt his father when he took his money and ran, who had abandoned the family, who had abandoned his brother?

And the parable doesn't tell us. It's left as an open question. The story doesn't resolve, in some sense, doesn't end. Instead, the story fades out on the older brother and the father outside of the party, with the father telling his older son:

Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found. (Luke 15:31-32)

But we don't know what will happen. Does the older brother go to the party? Does he welcome his brother home? His position in the family would not be diminished if he did, but at the end of the story, he is undecided. Is his self-righteousness going to stop him from being a part of his own restored family? Or is he going to join the party and recognize and celebrate the unconditional love of the father, that he is invited to be a part of, to give and to receive?

I won't tell you how the book ends, in case you want to read it, but Mickey, who seems like the hero of the story, for me, the reader, and in her own mind, is faced with a choice. How is she going to relate to her missing sister and her sister's community? Is she going to be able to confront her own anger, her own prejudices, and be able to find the lost or is she going to be stuck in a narrative of her own self-righteousness with her sister as the failure, and because of that be unable to find her way back to her family and solve the mystery.

I won't tell you what happened, but I will say that this book rattled me. It made me think, even though I have read today's parable a hundred times or more.

It reminded me that today's parable, should have us examining our own hearts, our own assumptions, about who is out and who is in, about who is righteous and who is not, about who is welcome and who is not, about who deserves forgiveness and who does not, or at least who we act like does not and who society treats like they do not.

The book has an ending. The parable does not. Because the question remains. What does the older brother do? How does the parable end? What happens next? Are we going to go to the party?