

**Sermon preached by the Reverend Neil K. Raman, Associate Rector
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19C
September 15, 2019**

This past May, Robert F. Smith gave the commencement address at Morehouse College in Atlanta. In the hours and days following the address what he went viral. His words were shared countless times on Facebook and Twitter and reported on by the likes of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*. Almost all of the major cable networks covered it during the following week. Smith isn't a well-known celebrity or politician. He is a chemist turned investor who sees his success and good fortune as opportunities to be generous. To help others as he had been helped. It was no surprise that he was receiving an honorary degree.

During what would otherwise be a rather normal commencement address Smith shocked everyone. He said: "On behalf of the eight generations of my family that have been in this country, we're gonna put a little fuel in your bus. This is my class, 2019. And my family is making a grant to eliminate their student loans." In an instant, a collective debt of about 40 million dollars was erased and the lives of nearly 400 graduates were changed.

Before the end of the day, article after article could be found examining Smith's actions from every conceivable angle. Many praised his gift. Others were more critical. They asked if the 40 million dollars couldn't have done more good elsewhere.

"It isn't the most efficient way to help?"

"Why couldn't that money have been put in endowment for future scholarships?"

Others still, in an echo of the parable of the workers in the vineyard, focused on their perception of the fairness or unfairness of the situation.

"What about the graduates who managed to make it through school without much debt?"

"Isn't this just rewarding poor financial decisions?"

All of these articles and critiques miss the point. One extravagant generous act can change everything.

The two parables in this morning's gospel reading build on each other. A parable about a shepherd searching for a lost sheep. A parable about a woman who spends an entire day searching for a coin and throws a party upon finding it. Our lectionary leaves it out but there is a third parable in the progression – a much longer parable about a lost son and his family. Each parable follows a similar outline. Something or someone is lost, a sheep, a coin, a son. Someone undertakes a risky or ill-advised search. Finally, celebration orders of magnitude greater than what any reasonable person would expect.

Loss.

Unbridled searching.

Extravagant celebration.

The more time you spend with these parables the less sense they seem to make. Jesus starts each one with a question:

"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep ...?"

"Or what woman having ten silver coins...?"

“No one of us would!”

“No woman would!”

The actions taken by the characters in the parables don't make any sense. It's bad business to leave 99 sheep unattended in to risk your life to go alone into the wilderness searching for one sheep that's probably dead already. Just as it makes no sense to forgo a day's wages to look for a single coin only to throw a party worth more than the coin itself to celebrate its finding. Both the search and the celebration are extravagant and wasteful. The shepherd and the woman looking for the coin are not being rational. It's a horrible business decision for the shepherd and the woman's time is worth more than a single coin. They are taking great risk for little reward.

But the parables aren't fables or morality tales. They're more than short stories with a simple moral lesson at the end. Instead of teaching us how we should act they tell us about how God acts and what the Kingdom of God looks like. These parables, in particular, are examples of God's extravagant love towards each of us. They reveal a God who is willing to go to extreme lengths for our sake. Willing to go out into dangerous places to find those of us who might otherwise be called lost causes. A God who refuses to count the cost. A God who will not relent until he has brought the whole world to himself. For God, no person is too far gone. No distance too extreme or dangerous to travel.

In telling these parables Jesus points to what he plans to do when he finally arrives in Jerusalem. Through Jesus God has come searching for each of us. He takes on himself the risk of the parable's shepherd searching for that one lost sheep in order to seek and search for each of *us*. It is a search that led him to Calvary, to the cross, so that he could bring us with him to the empty tomb and the joy of the resurrection. It was an act of immeasurable cost for our gain. An unearned unsought gift from God to the whole world. An extravagant and ridiculous act of love.

Some of Robert Smith's critics are probably right. There likely were more reasonable ways for him to give. Other ways to maximize what the largest gift in the college's history could do. But again, I think they miss the point of Smith's action. Intended or not that commencement address became a living breathing parable. An example of what an unsought, unearned, and unmerited gift looks like. A picture of Grace.

“Morehouse President David Thomas...called Smith's gesture ‘a liberation gift.’ ‘When you have to service debt, the choices about what you can go do in the world are constrained,’ he said. ‘(Smith's gift) gives them the liberty to follow their dreams, their passions.’”¹ The “liberation gift” given on that Sunday last May points us all to the gift of Grace that we receive from Jesus on the cross and Easter Day. Smith's gift changed the lives of those 400 graduates in a way that an endowment gift never would have. Money from a scholarship fund doesn't have the visceral impact that having the slate wiped clean. In an instant, their lives changed through no action of their own. That taste of Grace was as life-changing as the gift itself.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/19/us/morehouse-robert-smith-student-loans-trnd/index.html>