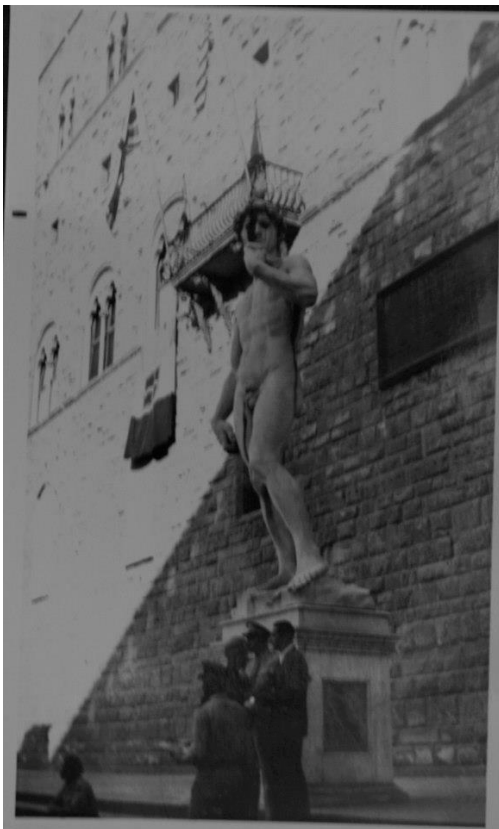


Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia

Lent IV – March 10, 2013



Michelangelo's David
Photo by Bollin M. Millner
Taken in Florence, Italy
during World War II



Unfinished sculpture by Michelangelo

The Epistle

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we

entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The Gospel

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, '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!' Then the father said to him, '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 to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

The Sermon

I have included two photos in the bulletin this morning. One of them was taken by my father in WWII. My Dad served in the Army in North Africa and in Italy. While in Italy he was able to visit Florence where he took a beautiful photo of Michelangelo's David. Certainly this stands as one of the most beautiful statues of all time.

The second photo is of an unfinished statue, also by Michelangelo. It appears to be a seated figure. You can make out the legs and the arms...the arms reaching up to an unformed head, almost seeming to be struggling to pull the head and its features out of the stone. This too is moving in its own way, isn't it?

Why do I share these photos with you? It is because visually, for me, they express part of what the life of faith is all about. And, they show what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Corinthians. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

The human condition, under sin, is like the unfinished sculpture of Michelangelo. There is much beautiful there, much to be commended, and yet the full potential, the full beauty, the full humanity, the perfection of the person is unrealized. In baptism, we are buried with Christ, so that we can be raised in the fullness of our being, complete, polished and perfected. The old has passed away, everything is becoming new. The present reality will be chipped away, bit by bit by bit, revealing the person God meant you to be. In the Spirit, the unfinished pieces of work that we all are, will be fully formed...we shall become creations of perfect beauty.

And so, as Paul said, we become ambassadors of this hope and promise...even before the complete fulfillment of it in our own lives, we become ambassadors. We have committed ourselves to the journey, to the process and that is enough...that is all we need to share this hope with others... "Come join us on the way". We are ambassadors. Maybe that is the word Episcopalians need to use, because evangelism seems to scare the socks off of us. You are ambassadors. Maybe that is the word!

But, let's spend some time of the concept of the new creation, of becoming what we are, of chipping away at sin. What does that look like? We know that Michelangelo used a hammer and a chisel. What are the tools at our disposal?

One of the tools is Lent. That is what this season is all about...chipping away at sin...becoming more fully formed into the image of Christ. Far from simply being about losing a few pounds, as important as that is, Lent can be a time of tremendous faith development. So, if your discipline is set and working for you, then keep on doing what you are doing. If you have faltered, fear not. Every day is a new beginning, so keep trying and God will bless your efforts.

There are lots of other tools that empower us to move toward Christ and our own best selves...things like worship, community, service, personal prayer, faithful stewardship and much more.

But one tool we have at our disposal and that I'd like to highlight...and this is going to sound odd...but another tool we have is narrative... the stories we tell about ourselves and to ourselves. People are story formed and story driven. That is just how we are made.

Do you remember or have you read about the great African America civil rights leaders in our country. A chant was developed which ran, "I am, some body." "I may be poor, but I am somebody." "I might look different than you, but I am somebody." "I might speak a different language, but I am somebody." It was based on a poem by the Rev. William Borders.

These things needed to be said over and over and over again to counter the false narrative which had been told by our culture...that some people are “nobody.” The truth had to be said, over and over and over again to counter the lie told by Jim Crow laws, by massive resistance, by personal prejudice... the lie that some people do not deserve equality and respect. Some people internalized the evil narrative that had been told to them and came to believe it about themselves. The results were devastating. So a new, true narrative had to be established so that a new creation could emerge. We are story formed people.

We heard today in the gospel one of Jesus’ most famous narratives or parables. But you know what? Each person in this parable had their own story going on in their mind...so there are stories within the story.

The younger son’s internal tape loop ran like this: “I am worthless. I don’t deserve to be a son. All I can hope for now is a life of servitude. But it beats dying of starvation... I am worthless. I don’t deserve to be a son. All I can hope for now is a life of servitude. But it beats dying of starvation...I am worthless...”

The older son’s internal tape loop went something like this: “My father loves my brother best. I do all the right things, I grind it out, and for what? Nothing... My father loves my brother best. I do all the right things, I grind it out, and for what? Nothing...My father loves my brother best...”

But the narrative that is meant to override all the others is that of the father in this parable. And this is not an internal tape loop that the father keeps to himself. This is something he says out loud to his children.

You were lost, but now you are found. I love you my child.
You are always with me and all that I have is yours. I love you my child.

And don’t you know, don’t you see, this is how God treats each one of us, as the father treated his children in that parable. To counter all the evil and wrong headed narratives that might have been told to us or that we might tell to ourselves, God says, “You are my beloved child. With you and I am well pleased. Become what you are already in my eyes.” You must tell this to yourself over and over and over again...until you believe it in your bones... “You are God’s beloved child. With you God is well pleased. Become what you already are in God’s eyes.”

In God’s eyes, each one of you is like a beautiful, fully formed statue of Michelangelo... you are even better than that because you are from the hand of God. Use the tools of faith that have been given to us by God. Chip away at all that bends toward sin and death. Tell the story of God to yourself. And tell it to and for everyone else as well.

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ... So we are ambassadors for Christ...For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That is the good news. That is the true story. Tell it to yourself. Tell it to the world. Amen.