

**Stories we need to hear**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent**  
**March 27, 2022**  
**The Rev. Katherine M. Bush**

It's entirely possible that I had children so that I could read to them: *Goodnight Moon* and *The Runaway Bunny* and *Harry Potter*, stories I knew already that I couldn't wait til it was time to share with them. And other stories that came along as they grew up that we discovered together: *Extra Yarn* and *Wonder* and *The Tale of Despereaux*. I was also fortunate enough to be read to: my mom read *The Secret Garden* to me, my third-grade teacher read *The BFG* and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. Among all these stories, *Charlotte's Web* ranks near the top of the list, and it's one that was read to me, that I read on my own, that I've read to my children, and that I've listened to a recording of EB White himself reading it - amazing.

Not long ago, I heard Kate DiCamillo (author of the aforementioned *Tale of Despereaux*) talk about the extraordinary power of *Charlotte's Web* and why we keep turning to that story and perhaps others like it. She says,

"My childhood best friend read *Charlotte's Web* over and over again as a kid. She would read the last page, turn the book over, and begin again. A few years ago, I asked her why. 'What was it that made you read and reread that book?' I asked her. 'Did you think that if you read it again, things would turn out differently, better? That Charlotte wouldn't die?' 'No,' she said. 'It wasn't that. I kept reading it not because I wanted it to turn out differently or thought that it would turn out differently, but because I knew for a fact that it wasn't going to turn out differently. I knew that a terrible thing was going to happen, and I also knew that it was going to be okay somehow. I thought that I couldn't bear it, but then when I read it again, it was all so beautiful. And I found out that I could bear it. That was what the story told me. That was what I needed to hear. That I could bear it somehow.'"

There are a lot of stories in the Bible that were read to me, and some that I still hear in the voice of a man named Sy Hill who was the deacon at my church growing up, and so his was the voice, in particular, of the gospels. I kinda still hear his voice telling me the story of the prodigal family after all this time. This is a story I've read and reread, and maybe you have to - or maybe today is the very first time you've ever heard it. It seems like a different story from *Charlotte's Web*, but both take place at a pig farm, and actually, both are about deep love and finding home and everyday miracles. And both are stories worth reading again and again and again. Because they tell us something we need to hear. These are the stories that tell us what we can bear.

Kate DiCamillo explains that EB White's story about the spider named Charlotte works because EB White "loved the world. And in loving the world, he told the truth about it - its sorrow, its heartbreak, its devastating beauty." And isn't that as good a description of Jesus as you've ever heard? He loved the world, and he told us the truth - its sorrow, its heartbreak, its devastating beauty. And this prodigal family's story is one of sorrow and heartbreak - sons hurting their fathers and brothers turning their backs on each other. And it's a story of devastating beauty as fathers run to welcome the sons who left home and embrace the sons who never left physically but are just as far gone. This is a story worth reading and rereading

because it's so beautiful. And it tells us what we need to hear, it tells us what we can bear, it tells us the truth - about family and mercy and love and hard hearts and forgiveness.

Jesus loved the world; he loved the tax collectors and sinners and the grumbling Pharisees and scribes. And he told the truth about the world to them and to all of us. He told the truth about how we make bad choices and how we hurt each other; he told the truth about how we think we can make it on our own and the truth about how hungry we get - for a good meal, yes, and also hungry for the comfort of home. Jesus loved the made-up families and pig farms because they are just as real as the families you and I grew up in and the places where we work today. We read these stories over and over again not because we think they'll turn out differently but because we find ourselves in the stories and we get a glimpse in them of what we can bear. As another author, this time it's Gregory Maguire, puts it, in reading these tales, "you learn you can live through the moonless nights."

In today's story, we get a glimpse of something of the mercy that runs through the narrative. You might say we learn to find the stars in those moonless nights, like the father and each of his sons needed to find. We see the possibility of a surprise turn of events where wandering sons are welcomed home and forgiven, and sons who never left but whose hearts had perhaps wandered away are also embraced. One of the things that the prodigal story tells us is that there is a version of any story where reconciliation and return, however unlikely they may seem, are indeed possible. So, the beautiful true thing that Jesus might be telling the tax collectors and sinners and the grumbling Pharisees and scribes and you and me is that reconciliation and return are possible even for us. Consider what that means to have a story like this one that you've heard enough times become embedded in your heart that shows you how the return trip can go, how things can turn out for the better, how hard hearts can soften.

I wonder what other stories I need to hear. What story do you need to hear? Do we need to learn something about reconciliation and return, or maybe something about forgiveness? Or maybe about recklessly heading out into the world and then finding our way back. Might you and I be wondering if lost things can be found and if anyone is still looking out the window? Are you wondering if you can bear letting go of propriety to throw a party for someone you're not supposed to be glad to see (but you are), or if you can bear letting go of a grudge that's kept you company for a lot of moonless nights? Are you ready for a story about a pig farm where people look up, come to themselves, and learn things - about themselves, about hunger (maybe even from spiders and their webs)? Do you need a reminder that you can live through the moonless nights? Let me tell you a story about a family ... or about a coin, or about a wedding banquet, or about a flood a long time ago, or a queen, or about betrayal, or maybe you'd like to hear one about the most surprising plot twist ever - come back in a few weeks for that one.

If it's not a surprise ending to you that the father wraps the son in his best robe because you've heard this one before, if you've got something in common with the young friend who read the same book over and over again, then take a moment to consider why you and I do that with these parables, with all these stories from the Bible. She knew and so do we that you and I need to imprint these stories in our hearts - precisely because the stories aren't going to change, it won't turn out differently, the ending stays the same - sad and beautiful, comforting and hard. We learn that we can bear it all, that there's still beauty to be found amidst the heartbreak, that we aren't alone, that someone loves us enough to tell us the truth about the world.

