

## **“God, the Recycler and Redeemer”**

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Bilikiss Addbiyi-Abiola, is a young woman from Lagos, Nigeria, who was given a wonderful opportunity to study at Massachusetts Institute of Technology toward a masters of Business Administration degree. While studying in this country, Bilikiss learned that people in the U. S. recycle. People sort their trash into recycling bins, and this simple act is helping preserve the environment by dramatically decreasing the amount of trash in landfills. “Why not in Nigeria?” Bilikiss thought.

In Lagos, about 60 percent of the trash made by the 21 million residents is never collected. It sits in piles and sometimes in the street. Uncollected trash is a dangerous health hazard. Garbage piles are breeding grounds for flies and rodents that spread diseases.

Bilikiss’ new way of seeing trash awakened her to new possibilities for the MBA she was earning. She wasn’t going to use her degree to start just any business. She decided that, after graduation, she would return home to start a recycling business to help Nigeria with its trash problem.

Soon after her graduation, Bilikiss returned home to Lagos, eager to make a difference for her people. When she shared with her people how recycling would help their environment, however, many of the people in Lagos didn’t buy into her plan. It’s always difficult to get people to change their ways, especially with something as trivial as trash.

Then she had another revelation. Rather than showing people what recycling could do for the city, she would show them what recycling could do for them, the value of what they were throwing away.

Lagos generates approximately 735,000 tons of plastic each year, worth about \$300 million to waste brokers who resell it to recyclers and others. Bilikiss started offering incentives, paying people for their recyclables.

Today, Wecyclers, Bilikiss's recycling business, is cleaning up! They visit some 6,000 homes each week exchanging cash and household goods for recyclables, collecting 40 tons each month.

Bilikiss has changed the way the people of Lagos look at their garbage. The lost money once left lying in the street is being reclaimed. What was once trash is now seen as a treasure.

In today's Gospel lesson we hear a familiar story of a young person who leaves home, like Bilikiss, seeking a new opportunity in his life. The young man boldly and insensitively asked his father for his share of his future inheritance. When his father complied with his request, he left home with the money.

Unlike Bilikiss, who used her opportunity for a good cause, this young man didn't do anything productive and worthwhile, but wasted his opportunity and squandered the money in "extravagant living," as Jesus delicately puts it.

After a while, he, too, found himself looking at trash. Where Bilikiss saw an opportunity, this man saw how his life had hit rock bottom. It is then he came to his sense. He had turned his dad's treasure into trash, and it was time to turn his life around. He devised a plan for going home, and rehearsed an apology. In humility, he would ask his dad for a servant job.

We know how this story ends. As soon as the father saw his boy coming toward home in the far distance, he hiked up his robes, and sprinted out to greet his son. Before his son finishes the speech he'd planned for this moment, he calls for robes, rings and fatted calves.... and a party.

The true treasure he had lost when his son left home has been returned to him. He sees in his son treasure, not trash.

Probably many of us can put ourselves in the young man's place. We, too, have a voice inside of us that only wants to dwell on the garbage in our lives. We've made mistakes, and we hear over and over again that, like a discarded bottle or can, whatever was of value inside of us has been poured out.

Or sometimes the way other people treat us may make us feel that something about us is not worthy or pleasant to look at. That feeling may have stuck in us and has become as the self image of our selves... junky.

As Bilikiss saw the abandoned aluminum and plastics as "money lying on the street," so God sees the value in us even when we are far from God. We have not been tossed aside. God loves us and knows our worth.

When we turn toward God, God sprints towards us, embraces us and welcomes us home.

Unfortunately, we may have people in our life, who will continue to reinforce the old message, who cannot see the treasure in people as God sees. Do you remember that Bilikiss had trouble convincing the people of Lagos the value of recycling? She saw the “money lying in the street.” But they didn’t.

Neither does the older brother in Jesus’ story. While his father is celebrating the gift of his restored family, the older brother still sees trash. To his father, he names his brother’s sins as bluntly as he can, trying to convince his father that the younger brother is a worthless aggregation of landfill trash.

The father gently points to the value of both of his sons—the one who has been found, and the one who was never lost. Both are treasures to him. Then he invites his son to the party.

Among the listeners of this parable were both younger sons and older sons. Sinners and tax collectors, who gathered around Jesus, represent the younger sons. The Pharisees and legal experts, who grumbled about Jesus welcoming those sinners, represent the older sons.

I believe we can find both the younger son and the older son who co-exist in us. Sometimes we are the younger son, who turns around and comes home to God. We said a prayer of confession a short time ago.

Other times we are more like the older son, who cannot see the treasure and potential in others that God sees...and we miss the party.

Let's remember. God is the great Recycler and Redeemer, who reclaims the treasure we often miss.

Today, Jesus invites us all to a party -- the table of bread and cup. Whether we have been younger sons or older sons, let us all come to the table as God's sons and daughters. Amen.