

C Lent 4 3.27.22

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Focus Statement: God is looking for reasons for welcome.

I had a weird Tuesday this week. Right in a row two things happened that gave me a lot to ponder. I had a meeting out of the office in the morning, so I was driving in about noon with NPR on the radio. Nothing, by the way, weird about that. Tuesday was the second day of the confirmation hearing for Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson, and NPR was broadcasting the hearing. First thing I learned on Tuesday is that the senators all sound the same to me, and because I was driving to a meeting, back from a meeting, to the library, home to get my lunch, to church, etc., I regularly lost track of what senator was talking, so I have no idea who this interaction was with. But, whoever the senator was who was talking as I was driving up Michigan Avenue behind the Post plant started asking her opinion on the Obergefell case, which legalized same-sex marriage. "Do you agree with me," this senator asked, "that all three of the world's major religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, support a traditional understanding of marriage?" Through the entire hearing Judge Jackson showed incredible restraint to incredibly ridiculous questions, so I have no doubt she answered this one with grace and clarity. I, on the other hand, began to yell at my radio, so I can't tell what her response was. My response was this, "Friend," and again, I don't know who the senator was, so I could not address him by name, "friend, for starters, you named the three *Abrahamic* religions, there are other major world religions, that you just entirely left out of this conversation. But, for the sake of argument, sure, let's go with these three. They do not all universally agree even with themselves, on anything. I, for example, am admittedly one very small part of one of the religions mentioned, and I don't share your definition of a so-called "traditional marriage," though I certainly know

Christians who do. Similarly, I have friends in both the Jewish and Muslim traditions who don't share your definition, though, again, know Jews and Muslims who do. The point here, friend, is no, all three major world religions—itsself an inaccurate statement—do not agree with you. Some people in these religions do, some do not. All come to these conclusions through deeply held religious beliefs. But it is the height of hubris to assume that your opinions are the deeply held beliefs of all people of faith." You can tell, I got quite heated in my completely unnecessary car rebuttal to the distinguished senator from I have no idea where.

So that happened. And while I was still grumbling, pulling into the parking lot at Trinity, I got a text from Teresa. "You had an interesting visitor this morning." Turns out, a man had come by the building earlier, wanting to talk to the pastor because he has a message from God for me. He was frustrated that I was not in but agreed to let Teresa take down the message from God for me. The message was this, "God said: this city needs to repent and turn their faces to God." Then he urged me to read a chapter of Jeremiah so that I would be prepared for what's coming. Teresa dutifully wrote all this down for him and gave me the note when I got in. These sorts of things happen sometimes, and I've read the chapter of Jeremiah he recommended and wasn't sure it was real relevant, so I folded the note up, put it in my pocket, and forgot about it. Until every time I stood up from my desk and thought, "what's in my pocket?" Then I would pull out the little note calling for repentance, and that's when a funny thing happened. See if you were here last Sunday, you probably remember that the Gospel text was "repent or perish" and Jesus telling the parable of the fig tree and the gardener, how in Jesus there is always one more year to turn around,

change our ways, and bear good fruit. I honestly don't know if this was the message the messenger intended, but it was the message from God I received. Every time I remembered that little note in my pocket, I remembered the urgency of God's grace, a love that does not wait patiently but instead works the soil until repentance springs forth.

All of this, my fight with the unnamed senator and my visit from the messenger of God, played into how I heard our parable for this morning. This parable is commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Prodigal meaning wasteful or extravagant, having or giving something on a lavish scale. R. Alan Culpepper, who's Luke commentary I've been reading this year, remarks that calling it the Parable of the Prodigal Son only focuses on half the story. This is a "two-peaked parable," Culpepper says, two stories combined into one. The parable starts, "A man had two sons," and then, and here my older sibling prejudice shows up a bit, we focus exclusively on the younger one and forget about the older one. Ask me sometime about the toast my mother gave at my little brother's wedding about her fears at David's birth about her ability to take care of this tiny perfect human, never mentioning the fact that they already had a three-year-old, but I digress. The point is, we forget the older brother. Culpepper posits a more accurate title could be "The Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Waiting Father, and the Elder Brother."

In fairness though, we remember the younger brother because he's a punk. He asked his dad his share of his inheritance—a seminary classmate of mine from Palestine shared that in her culture such a request was akin to telling your dad you wished he was dead—then took that share and "squandered his property in dissolute living." Then there was a famine,

and things went rapidly from bad to worse. He soon found himself at rock bottom for the Jewish son of a landowner, beholden to Gentiles, feeding pigs and dreaming about eating the pigs' food.

Here, at the lowest of the low, an amazing thing happened. In a phrase Culpepper described as pregnant with potential, recognizing our human ability to recognize and renounce error, change our ways, and return to our potential, the younger son "came to himself." The younger son recognized he could not undo what had been done. He had already received his inheritance, what remained was property of his brother. But maybe he could return, confess his failures, and receive some kind of welcome from his father. He prepared his remarks, a confession in four parts very similar to the confession we say at the start of our services, first an address, "father", followed by confession, "I have sinned," contrition, "I am no longer worthy," and petition, and he headed home.

But before the younger son can speak these words, his father stopped what he was doing and ran to him. My Palestinian classmate remarked on the indignity of this action. No self-respecting adult of this culture would ever run to greet someone, but run this father did. The son only managed to get through the first three parts of his proclamation, address, confession, contrition, before the father cut him off, returning to him all the marks of his sonship, signs for the community that he was again part of this family. "And they began to celebrate."

And here the older brother enters the scene for the first time. And he is, annoyed, to put it lightly, about the fuss being made over his free-wheeling younger brother. “Listen,” he said to his father, refusing to acknowledge the father-son relationship, “for all these years I have been working like a slave for you... and you’ve never even given me a goat... to celebrate. But when this son of yours—notice *now* we have a familial relationship, one that successfully distances the older brother from both of them—when this son of yours came back... you killed the fatted calf for him!”

The older brother is mad. And again maybe my older sibling prejudice here but, rightly so. After all, he’d done the right thing. He’d been a good kid his whole life, and no one was throwing him a party for that. Except, and this may be me reading too far into the text, but I hear in the brother’s frustration the same frustration I felt, if I’m honest with myself, when I heard the distinguished senator from somewhere claim that all Christianity, Judaism, and Islam agreed with him, and I didn’t agree with him. I wish I could say my rage was on behalf of my LGBTQIA siblings because they are whose rights are really being wronged here, but, again, if I’m honest with myself, it was mostly about me feeling overlooked. Hey there, distinguished senator from somewhere, I’m a Christian too. I’ve done the things, I’ve read the bible, I pray, don’t forget about me in your blanket statements of what Christians do and do not think. The older brother, the distinguished senator, and I all make the same mistake here, standing on the outside being upset about who else got invited to a party we’d already been included in. The distinguished senator thinks only people who think like him are part of the kingdom because there are not possibly people of faith who think differently, I think everyone—except the distinguished senator because that guy is a real

buzzkill—is probably invited, and the older brother is like, how come this punk troublemaker gets a party when I've been here the whole time.

Enter the messenger from God and his post-it note reminder that this is a story not about me, not about the distinguished senator, not about two brothers, but about a man who had two sons. Two sons who were each lost in their own way, and to whom the father ran out to meet with uncontrollable compassion. This is a story about the God who will stop at nothing to restore the relationship between God and God's people, and God's people are all people. The Kingdom of God is full of people we would not expect, people we would rather not be there. On my more compassionate days I can even feel sympathy for the distinguished senator and those who think like him for how small and boring his Kingdom of God must be, lacking so much of the diversity and vibrancy and creativity and challenge that I have experienced it to contain. That's not to say I don't challenge the distinguished senator, you can feel sympathy without allowing that smallness to constrain others, but it does mean I have to keep my own reasons in check, and make sure I am advocating on behalf of the Kingdom of God and not using the Kingdom of God to make myself feel good. It's a tricky balance, I screw it up all the time. But as the messenger from God reminded me, while there is an urgency in this work, there is always still time for repentance. Always Jesus the not just patient but expectant and hard-working gardener, tending and turning the soil that is me, that is us, anticipating the good fruit to come when we who are lost in so many ways, discover ourselves to be found. Thanks be to God. Amen.