

C Lent 4 3.31.19

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Focus Statement: God isn't fair, God is love.

With our new core values identified, and our welcome statement, I've been thinking a lot recently about this idea of inclusion. Specifically, I've been thinking about how ridiculously hard it is! I mean it's nice, it's a nice idea. But to really, truly be inclusive, to welcome everyone. Friends, not going to lie, there are some people that I just find hard to be around.

While I was thinking about this I read a commentary this week that flipped this parable on its head for me and forced me to read it in a way I never had before. And I want to share it with you, because I've read this parable a million times, and I'm sure many of you have too, and I've seen it like this before.

So this commentary started out by challenging one of the very basic assumptions I've made about the parable, why the younger son left. "Jesus told them a 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.''" The question then is why, why did the younger son ask for his half of the inheritance? Why did the younger son want to leave? Every time I've read this parable my working assumption has always been some combination of greed or arrogance. The younger son was impatient, he wanted his money now, he wanted to go out have a good time. I have always read the younger son as a spoiled, entitled brat who thought only about himself.

But what if I've been reading the younger son wrong? What if the son didn't want to leave, what if he had to? What if he was being threatened by a gang, and the choice was join or die? What if he was gay in a community where that wasn't a safe way to be identified? There are so many reasons why people are forced to leave their homes and communities against their will, to seek refuge in another place. Why people take tremendous risks and leave a place they call home, because that home is no longer safe for them. What if the father let the son go not because he was appeasing the son's selfish desires, but because he knew that sending his son away was the boy's only hope for survival?

But wait, you might wonder, the text does go on that when the younger son traveled to this distant country he "squandered his property in dissolute living." Doesn't that justify the read that the younger son was a punk kid? Does it? First off, there's the question, what does the parable mean by "dissolute living." Other times this word shows up in the Bible it's related to over-indulgence, but in this story the younger brother's actions were really only defined by the older brother's perceptions. And perceptions of how others ought to be responding based on your own experience of the world are dangerous things. I've been around Woman's Co-op long enough to have learned, over and over and over again, that the way that I might approach a problem with the privileges I bring as white, middle-class, and well-educated, don't work in the world of their members. Good financial planning says your housing costs shouldn't exceed thirty percent of your income. I remember discussing with Teresa the difference in rental cost for the apartment I had at Pine Knoll when I first moved to town, and some of the places members were living. "These places are terrible," I told her, "and they're super expensive, why are members choosing to live there?" She

paused: "Did you pay a deposit when you moved in?" Yes. "First and last month's rent?" Yes. "Have you ever been evicted?" No. "How about a credit check or a background check, did they run those?" I guess so. "David Herdman drove you around looking at apartments; did he vouch for your employment?" He did. "Those questions," she reminded me, "not everyone can answer those the way you just did. And if you couldn't, you wouldn't be renting at Pine Knoll either." And this still doesn't address the problem of housing discrimination based on race, disability, or sexual orientation. So the question of the younger son, was it squandering if it really was his best, or only, option?

Eventually, as it so often does, the bottom dropped out on this young man. The house of cards he was carefully holding together couldn't withstand the outside forces of a famine sweeping through the land, and he found himself taking the only job he could find, feeding pigs that ate better than he did. Faced yet again with no good options, the boy returned home. Not because this choice was better, but because there was no other choice.

So here's where the story gets weird. The younger son returned home, dejected, defeated, abused, ashamed, guilty, uncertain, and was met by the father. Not just met, but like, was actually charged by the father. The text says the father ran out to his son, which means the father who had earlier willingly allowed the boy to leave, and in fact under the reading we've been doing, even understood the boy's reasons for leaving, never gave up hope that the boy might return again, had stood out by the gate day after day in the faint hope that his son might return. The father ran out to his son, and when the son tried to apologize, tried to slide quietly into some lesser place, the father brushed his words aside, instead calling

for the best robe, the ring, the sandals, to celebrate that his son who was lost is home again. There is no shame from the father toward the boy's actions, to who he was, to his leaving, or to the failures which brought him back again.

And if the story ended here, that would be a wonderful story. Because that's inclusion embodied, isn't it. The father running to meet his son, welcoming him home, giving him the best things, throwing the huge party. The world may have judged the boy, cast him aside, thrown him away, but the father welcomed him in with open arms, you, who you are, as you are, are my beloved. Amen.

But the story didn't end here. Because there's still the older son. The son who didn't have to leave, who was able to get by, to fit in, to hang around. Maybe he had to conform to the community, maybe he didn't, but he'd been there all along. And now he had to make space again for the younger brother. Inclusion is nice in theory, but in practice it's uncomfortable because it forces us to make space for those who don't sidle in as smoothly as we do. And the older brother, he just didn't want to have to do that again.

This parable is, as parables are, both good news, and challenge, and good news again. The good news is when we feel like the younger son. When we don't fit, are forced out, don't belong, when others belittle or demean or judge us, the good news is that God who is the father, does not. God may let us go, if that is the thing that we need, but God is also running to meet us, to bring us in, to welcome us home, to call us beloved. Welcome and inclusion are nice words, but they're not powerful enough words for the sort of rushing to gather us,

tripping over his robes in his haste, best robes, rings, and feasts that is how God includes, embraces, enfolds us. Friends the good news of this parable is whether you walked away, were walked away, or just found yourself outside, God is running up to you to bring you back home. This isn't inclusion; this is so much more than that.

The challenge is that while sometimes we're the younger son, a lot of times, we're the older one. Which means, we're going to be uncomfortable. We're going to have to change.

Because, let's face it, what happened to the older son wasn't fair. His brother took everything he had, and then came back and took even more. The older brother had to give a lot to make this relationship work, and if we really want to be inclusive, we will too.

People aren't going to fit nicely into our family, just like the younger brother didn't fit nicely in his. And sometimes, a lot of times, those folk who don't fit in, they can't change all that much, so we're going to have to be the ones who make space. You know this, you've done this already. It gets crazy in here sometimes. We had a rather lively neighbor come to Bible study last week. There's a three-year-old who steals cookies and makes a huge mess. I don't know why there are still giant auctioneers stands by the garage; Trinity is not your grandmother's silent, pristine church. But this is the family of God. It's big, and messy, and loud, and sometimes uncomfortable. Good, yes, but also hard.

And because this is God's story, there is of course also good news for the older son.

Because when he wasn't able to change. When he was sick of the noise, and the chaos, and the people tracking mud across the carpets AGAIN, the father came out to meet him too.

Came out to invite him back in, not just to the party but to the family. To remind him of his

own place of value, of how his sharp edges could still fit, and how others would move to make space for him.

Dear people of God, you have a place here. And, delightfully, because that's what makes this place so fun, so do all these other weirdos. And if any of this is hard for you, that's totally cool. It's ok to sit out for a bit, to get used to the changes. But don't sit out too long, because yeah it's loud and weird and chaotic. But this is the beloved community, in all its eccentricity. And you belong. Amen.

Note: The commentary that so changed my reading of this text was from the Disrupt Worship Project. A link to the article is here:

https://www.disruptworshipproject.com/rci/lent-4?fbclid=IwAROSBOq4pilJmZkdIeSwWXb6SiWiD_NAKuTqWRlodtWHzdnlughNPtA9rqY