

In My Father's House
Luke 15
September 13, 2020, Homecoming
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Thank you, Nathan [*for telling the story of the father and two sons in Luke 15.11-32*]

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

It's great to see Nathan this morning because I am so homesick for all of you on this Homecoming Sunday.

You may have noticed in Nathan's telling of the that famous "prodigal" story in Luke 15, that he talked most about the conversation between the father and the "bigger" son. Maybe that's because Nathan *is* a big brother. I can relate. I, too, am an "oldest child."

And it is clear from the beginning of Luke 15 that Jesus intends for his audience to relate to the older son. "All the tax-collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus and the religious leaders said: 'This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

Those religious folks don't want any part of the party Jesus is planning. They are the older children in the story who can't see the point in celebrating the returning – the finding – of those who, by their own doing or by the assumptions of others, are a lost cause.

As the president might say, they have no time for the people they think are "losers."

Actually, Jesus tells three stories in Luke 15 to get his point across:
a shepherd who has a hundred sheep but loses one and goes off to find it;
a woman who has ten coins and loses one and she turns her house upside down until she finds it;
and a father who has two sons, one of whom takes his money and runs.

In all these cases, what is lost still has value:
the lost sheep is still of value to the shepherd who goes looking for it;
the lost coin doesn't lose any of its value just because it is lost;
the lost son is still a beloved child to that parent searching the horizon for some sign of homecoming.

So, the stories, in part, have something to do with what we value.

Now I have always thought that the great danger of this story is that it is so easy to get caught up in our own family dynamics.

So, I want to suggest this morning, that we read this story in terms of what we value.

And I'll grant that we might be predisposed to identify with one character more than others. I may identify with the "big brother." But, historically, it's the oldest son in that culture who has to deal with 2 things: responsibility and privilege.

And this story is an illustration of what happens when religious folks, like an eldest child, become so blinded by their sense of responsibility and so enamored of their privilege that they refuse to see the value in giving someone another chance.

One of the most telling things in this sequence of stories is in the first one about the shepherd and the sheep. Jesus says: "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine righteous people who *need* no repentance."

Sometimes I think we long-time good church folk think we *need* no repentance. That's for other people.

If there is anything our White Fragility conversation brought home to me it's that I, as a white person – especially a white person of faith – have some repenting to do. And I don't mean simply feeling guilty – that's easy for me. I mean real repentance.

I mean that we have to listen to the voices that show us who we are in the scheme of things.

We have to acknowledge the system we have helped to create and benefit from that provides us with privilege no matter how much money we make.

We have to own our responsibility to change our direction.

And we have to believe that our own repentance is necessary and possible.

When the older sibling is confronted for his refusal to join the party, he falls back on his faithfulness and his good work ethic that should have earned him a celebration of his own.

But, as you heard Nathan tell it, the father says: "It's not about work; it's about seeing if your family is happy and you see them."

The older sibling – AKA the religious folks in the crowd – are left with the question of whether *they* will repent; will they change course and join the party; will they care about the happiness of their wider human family; will they be willing to step out of their own self-inflicted blindness to see what celebrating there is to do.

And we are left to wonder: Does the older brother ever come home again?

The contrast, of course, is with this younger brother who does come home. As Nathan says, "he was hungry." He had wasted his money and found himself in a pig pen, competing with the pigs for food. And the story says, "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've always loved that line, "when he came to himself." This is, I think, the ultimate meaning of repentance. When you come to yourself. When you make that "searching and fearless moral inventory" of your life - that 4th Step in AA - that frees you for a spiritual awakening.

The younger sibling "comes to himself" and he remembers home. That's the place where all the workers have what they need to live. Whether heir or employee, everyone has enough ... and more. In other words, in my father's house, there is *justice*.

And I hear echoes of Isaiah 56. The promise to those who “maintain justice and do what is right,” even to foreigners and eunuchs – those who are “outsiders” and those who are identified as a sexual and gender minority – “in my house, God says, [they will have] a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.”

In fact, Jesus quotes Isaiah 56 when he stands in the Temple and yells out: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

Or you remember those last lines of Psalm 23: “Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will live in God’s house forever.”

Or that lovely promise in John 14: “I go to prepare a place for you ... in my father’s house are many rooms – many dwelling places.”

In my father’s house, there is justice.

In my father’s house, there is welcome for foreigners and sexual and gender minorities.
In my father’s house, there is goodness and mercy.

In my father’s house, everyone’s prayers are honored.

In my father’s house, there is place for you.

In my father’s house, there is room for second chances.

I have been reading *Unfollow*, the story of Megan Phelps-Roper who grew up in the infamous Westboro Baptist Church. You remember Fred Phelps and Westboro? They protested here at one point because, in this house, we openly welcome LGBT people.

Megan’s story is about how she began to see the superficial happiness in her family, the glee at the deaths of soldiers and children, the inconsistencies in their understanding about the Bible and world, the harm they were doing even as they claimed to be doing all this in the name of “loving your neighbor.”

She writes:

At home, we always equated love with rebuke ... As long as we believed our words to be truthful, we were free to rebuke the rest of the world at any time, in any place, and in any way we wanted. We could be harsh, and crude, and insulting, and it didn’t matter, because everyone else was Hell-bound anyway.

In her father’s house, there weren’t very many rooms.

In her father’s house, children were banished for telling the truth.

In her father’s house, love was twisted into self-righteous rebuke.

And here is the amazing thing. When she left – a kind of reverse prodigal – with nowhere to go, having lost to all that she had known, she was taken in by some of the very folks she had mocked and denigrated: a Rabbi in southern California, an evangelical gay man in New York, and many others.

Because here’s the thing: In *their* father’s house, there was room for the possibility of repentance – for coming to yourself. And in *that* house, there was the promise of another chance.

Every time I read this story, I think of lines from a sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr:

... when through our folly and sin we stray into some destructive far country and are frustrated because of a strange feeling of homesickness, we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance.

And today, if you hear that voice – that Someone – do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Megan Phelps-Roper, *Unfollow: A Memoir of Loving and Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), p.266. “A tough mind and a tender heart,” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the collection *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1963), p.20.