

“God’s Joy”

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Can you think of a time when you made your parents really proud? One image that comes to my mind is from Sundays when I would sing in the children’s choir of the church. Standing on the chancel steps in my choir robe that was the pale yellow of a baby chick, I would scan the pews for my father. He was always instantly recognizable in the immense Southern sanctuary because even sitting, his height made his head stand taller than those around him, especially with the added two inches his locks of curly hair added to the top of his head. I would catch his smile and it would make my heart skip a beat, at the same time nervous and reassured from his presence. I loved singing in the choir on my own, but in some sense I also recognized my participation in choir honored my father, who had sung in the boys’ choir as a child and traveled as a musician as a young adult.

Honor your parents, the Ten Commandments instructs. But for some reason, in this gospel story, the younger of the two sons does not seem to honor his father. He asks for his share of his inheritance before his father even dies. He leaves for another country, where he is too far to help his father run his property, or care for his father should his father become ill. Finally, he loses all the money his father so generously shared, and let’s just say it isn’t on books and school fees. When he finds himself broke and hungering longingly over the pig’s slop, he thinks home, remembering how even his father’s hired workers have more than enough bread to spare. More than any sense of remorse or change of heart, this lost boy finds his way home through his stomach.

The reason for his son’s return does not even seem to matter to the father, however. The father sees him arrive from far off, which leads the listener to imagine the father might have been scanning the horizon for the familiar shape of his son to appear. I wonder how that embrace must have felt to him: the scratch of his son’s cheek, the sweat of his neck, the smell of his hair. Every parent has a sense of how their child’s presence changes the air, and this father may have wondered if he would ever have the physical sensation of his son’s nearness again.

Just last week, Iranians celebrated Nowruz, which is the Iranian New Year. I heard a story last week about a library that sits right on the border between the US, at the Vermont State Line, and Quebec in Canada, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House. Because it is on the border, people can enter both from the US side and from the Canada side without a visa. This Free Library has become a place where Iranian families, who have been separated because of the US Travel Ban against Iranians, can reunite. Shirin Estahbanati, a student in the US on a single entry visa, had not seen her father for three years, even after his heart attack, because she knew that if she were to leave, she would never be allowed to enter the US again as long as this travel ban stays in place. This library, however, enabled her to plan a reunion with her parents, who made long journey from Iran to Canada so they could meet and spend a few hours together in the library. “When they hugged each other, it felt to Shirin as if her father had shrunk. He took a deep breath as he held his daughter tight. ‘I missed your smell,’ he told her.

Remembering the moment, her smile turned down with the effort not to cry. ‘The time I was just hugging my parents,’ she said, “I was thinking, I wish I could stop all clocks all over the world.”¹

Here is the kind of love I imagine in the embrace of the father and his younger son. It does not seem to matter to the father why his son left, what he did while he was gone, or what made him return. Filial piety-- the ancient rules of respect for parents and elders-- held no weight. Categories of honor and shame melted away. In that moment, what was dead came to life; what was lost, was found. In that moment, there was a deeply intimate, life-giving connection that stopped time.

It seems, however, that the elder brother *was* keeping track of time: each minute his brother had gone, each hour he had spent working like a slave in their father’s field; and each coin of their inheritance that had been wasted. But no one was keeping track of him. In fact, when he arrives at the house after a day working in the fields, he hears music and dancing and has to ask a servant what was going on-- no one had even bothered to invite him to the party or even tell him that his brother had returned.

I am a typical middle child, so I feel empathy towards each brother’s experience and motivations. As much as the beauty of the father’s reunion with his younger son touches me, I can see how much this kind of sucks for the older brother. I also see it in various families where one sibling consistently performs well, and the other sibling has special needs. It can seem like all the family’s attention-- understandably-- goes

¹ Yeganeh Torbati, “Separated by Travel Ban, Iranian Families Reunite at Border Library.” *Reuters.com* November 28, 2018

towards the kid whose needs are more obvious. The other child holds it together for the most part, but anyone who scratches the surface might find a streak of resistance, resentment or rebellion running below.

Jesus speaks to two kinds of people in the same crowd. One group within the crowd, the Pharisees, represents the religious faithful. They know their bible; they practice their prayers; they make the right offerings; and they keep the daily rules and rituals with precision. The other group-- probably curious onlookers-- represents the lost: those who came up in the faith but fail to practice it, and also-- as Jesus names-- tax collectors and sinners.

The Pharisees in the crowd hear a story of two brothers, and because they are so well-versed in scripture they immediately conjure up biblical sibling pairs: Cain and Abel; Ishmael and Isaac; Jacob and Esau; Leah and Rachel. In each family, the ironic twist is that the younger child has the favored gift, receives the favored blessing, or is more favored by her husband. These stories never justify why the younger sibling receives favor and in most cases, it is not even fair. So, when Jesus starts to spin a story that involves a younger brother and an older brother, the special treatment of the younger brother is not unfamiliar to the biblically literate.

Whatever message Jesus gives, it needs to be meaningful to both kinds of people, those who have stayed and those who are new. The righteous and the riotous.

A significant portion of our congregation is made up of people who have left: left their families, left their home countries, to see what this country might offer your lives. For some, the allure was educational or job opportunities. For others, it was love. For some, including children, you had family who came here with or before you, and you needed to be together. For still others, you felt lost in the country of your birth, and wondered if in a new home you might be found. If you have left, I know there is some part of you that still feels a pull: whether it is the needs of the family members you left behind, the language and food that feels like home in your mouth when English tires your lips and tongue. Perhaps the pull comes from the cultural values that formed you in your former country that you feel slipping away here.

When asked what went wrong with the younger brother, why his journey ended in failure, a Kenyan biblical student offered something I never thought about before. He said that the younger brother failed because no one in his new community chose to share with him. Finding no home in this new land, he longed for the home he had with his father.

This interpretation got me thinking. Could it be possible that, if the encounters this younger brother beheld in a new land embodied the same kind of welcome and joy as the father, the younger brother might have grown to become a success-- even a leader in this new land? Maybe, as this foreign land became home to him, he could have even sent money back to his family so that his brother would not have to work so hard. Maybe he could have found love-- not the love you have to pay for-- and started a family of his own.

The younger brother set out to see the world. The father was left looking, waiting and hoping to see his lost son again. As for the elder brother, his longing was to be seen: See how I follow the rules? See how hard I work? **Look at me!** But as he is wondering who might be watching him, he fails to see the generosity already around him. "Everything-- EVERYTHING that is mine is yours" said his father; "Son, you are always-- ALWAYS-- with me." Turns out he could have just taken the young goat and thrown a party of his own with his friends... but he never even asked for it. Who among us sits in an abundance you cannot even see because you are too focused on what rights or privileges, deserved or undeserved, someone *else* receives?

This is not a parable I am going to wrap up neatly for you. You won't leave here with a clear point or message as I try to offer in most of my sermons. Instead I hope-- through our Gospel Improv and my journey through these characters-- that you have experienced a deeper familiarity with the characters and contours of this text. Each one has life to offer. And I suspect-- just as Jesus preached to a crowd of multiple identities and multiple needs, each one of you will lift out what you need to keep this parable talking to you.

But I will leave you with this:

God sees each one of you. God notices each one of you. God has prepared an abundance for you-- do not be afraid to ask to share in it. God welcomes you and offers you a home each time you return. And-- most of all this-- you are a reason for causing God joy.

Amen.