

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Courage in the Wilderness: High Lonesome “A Spiritual Crisis”

Luke 15:1-3,11-32 Rev. Tyler Amundson March 31, 2019
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁶So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The Prodigal Son - in the Key of F

Feeling footloose and frisky, a featherbrained fellow forced his father to fork over his farthings. Fast he flew to foreign fields and frittered his family's fortune, feasting fabulously with floozies and faithless friends. Flooded with flattery he financed a full-fledged fling of "funny foam" and fast food.

Fleeced by his fellows in folly, facing famine, and feeling faintly fuzzy, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy foreign farmyard. Feeling frail and fairly famished, he fain would have filled his frame with foraged food from the fodder fragments.

"Fooley," he figured, "my father's flunkies fare far fancier," the frazzled fugitive fumed feverishly, facing the facts. Finally, frustrated from failure and filled with foreboding (but following his feelings) he fled from the filthy foreign farmyard.

Faraway, the father focused on the fretful familiar form in the field and flew to him and fondly flung his forearms around the fatigued fugitive. Falling at his father's feet, the fugitive floundered forlornly, "Father, I have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited family favor."

Finally, the faithful Father, forbidding and forestalling further flinching, frantically flagged the flunkies to fetch forth the finest fatling and fix a feast.

Faithfully, the father's first-born was in a fertile field fixing fences while father and fugitive were feeling festive. The foreman felt fantastic as he flashed the fortunate news of a familiar family face that had forsaken fatal foolishness. Forty-four feet from the farmhouse the first-born found a farmhand fixing a fatling.

Frowning and finding fault, he found father and fumed, "Floozy and foam from frittered family funds and you fix a feast following the fugitive's folderol?" The first-born's fury flashed, but fussing was futile. The frugal first-born felt it was fitting to feel "favored" for his faithfulness and fidelity to family, father, and farm. In foolhardy fashion, he faulted the father for failing to furnish a fatling and feast for his friends. His folly was not in feeling fit for feast and fatling for friends; rather his flaw was in his feeling about the fairness of the festival for the found fugitive.

His fundamental fallacy was a fixation on favoritism, not forgiveness. Any focus on feeling "favored" will fester and friction will force the faded facade to fall. Frankly, the father felt the frigid first-born's frugality of forgiveness was formidable and frightful. But the father's former faithful fortitude and fearless forbearance to forgive both fugitive and first-born flourishes.

The farsighted father figured, "Such fidelity is fine, but what forbids fervent festivity for the fugitive that is found? Unfurl the flags and

finery, let fun and frolic freely flow. Former failure is forgotten, folly is forsaken. Forgiveness forms the foundation for future fortune."

Four facets of the father's fathomless fondness for faltering fugitives are:

- 1) Forgiveness
- 2) Forever faithful friendship
- 3) Fadeless love, and
- 4) A facility for forgetting flaws¹

As we continue our wilderness journey during Lent I want to take a minute and remind us what Lent is about. In the early church Lent was the season when new people to the Christian faith learned about the faith, learned the survival skills of how to follow Christ, and then followed Jesus into death and new life through the rituals of holy week. People literally lived those Holy Week services and worked to experience the full story of Jesus life. Then on Easter Sunday after a vigil for Christ they were baptized into the faith. It was a full spiritual experience of wandering with Jesus to the end, and being reborn. Our hope during this series is that you gain skills to journey with Jesus in the wilderness of your life. The ultimate hope for us as pastors is that you learn to trust that you are child of God and that you belong to God, and you yourself feel that sense of belonging to your core. We hope that by Easter morning you walk out of worship renewed fully in your faith, to live both the social holiness of serving others, and the personal holiness of finding belonging in God each day.

I am going to say it because it needs to be said: Doesn't it feel like the entire world is entering a period where there is a complete collapse of moral judgement and a lack of a way to communicate with one another this concern? I think it would be incredibly easy to be an apocalyptic, end of the world preacher during this day in age. In fact, I need to let you know I am considering the change. The job would be easy. I would

¹ <http://across.co.nz/ProdigalSon-inF.htm>

just bring the newspaper to church every point to an article of something going wrong and say, “Look the world is going to hell, repent of your sins. God’s judgement is at hand.”

Naa that is too easy, you know why? It is easy to critique something until it falls apart and dies. It is easy to be a critic. You know what is hard, building. Building the kingdom of heaven is hard work, and God has told me too many times in scripture that despite my flaws, I am called to be a part of that work. That I am called to offer my flaws to God, for God the potter to fill in my cracks and to offer me connection with others who can work with me to build the kingdom.

The only way I have learned how to be a part of the kingdom building work is to try and model Jesus’ life in the way I live. Now, after trying for 34 years, I can say I am still a work in progress. However, the lessons we learn from Jesus are the survival skills we need right now to help build up instead of tear down.

In the research Brené Brown has done on people who appear to live whole hearted lives, and when she says whole hearted she is talking about lives grounded in the love and compassion we see Jesus practice, she finds that one of the key skills people practice is keeping a zoomed in focus on the world. Specifically she has found that people are hard to hate close up, so when we feel like we hate someone we should move in.

Let me share some examples from the Book *Braving the Wilderness*, *these are three actual scenarios from Brown’s research:*

The political rhetoric: Democrats are such losers.

Your experience: As a lifelong conservative, this sounds about right. But what about your closest friend at work—the one who drove you to the hospital when you got the call that your husband had a heart attack at

the gym and was being rushed to the ER? The one who sat with you in the CICU then raced to pick up your kids from school and take them to her house? The one who helped you plan the funeral and shouldered your workload while you were out? She's not a loser. In fact, you love her. And she's a Democrat.

The political rhetoric: Republicans are selfish assholes.

Your experience: You totally agree! Except for your son-in-law, who is a loving and wonderful husband to your son and the most amazing father to your granddaughter. Thank God he's in the family. Even more than your son, he's the one who sends you and your wife all of the cute pictures and keeps you connected to your sweet granddaughter. He's not selfish. He's not an asshole. And he's a Republican.

The political rhetoric: Anti-abortion activists are hypocrites and closed-minded fundamentalists.

Your experience: As a feminist activist, you couldn't agree more! Except for that great teacher you had in your Catholic high school. She had more integrity than anyone you know, and she constantly encouraged you to think critically about tough issues, even when it meant disagreeing with her. She's actually the one who taught you how to be an effective activist. She's not a hypocrite or closed-minded. And she's pro-life.²

Friends if I preach the end of the world from the newspaper it is easy, but our relationships are much more complex. People are much more complex than the headline, and even more headlines that sell. Newspapers and media figured out that if you write the headline the right way certain groups of people will click, buy and post comments to

² Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness* (pp. 64-65). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

get your newspaper higher ratings and connections. Politicians have the same incentive. Say the thing a certain way and you will rile up a group of people to do something or support you.

You remember what we learned last week, the world is getting lonelier and more divided. We have a responsibility to move in. Now I know this is not easy. Let me say this, my default response when I don't like someone or it feels like someone is in my way is to run them over. We know from Jesus ministry and even his death that people hate to have to deal with their feeling like they might have to change for love and connection to happen. We know from the book we are studying this Lenten season that there are two things we as people in modern America fear, perhaps more than death, and no it is not taxes.

We fear shame and grief. We fear first admitting we could be wrong in our own judgement of how we perceived the situation or the world and how we acted in return. Or even if we were right I think our shame is also born out of hurting people while being right. It was said in a sermon a few weeks back, sometimes we are just too nice because we would rather not feel the shame of dealing with a disagreement. Additionally, we don't fear death so much as grief. Grief is a messy process of dealing with the loss of opportunity, and we just don't like messy emotions in our relationships. And the hardest part is they both involve forgiveness. Forgiveness of ourselves, of people who might have broken every rule we know, forgiveness for our inability to act the way we should have, and forgiveness that we did not love as God calls us to love.

In Jesus ministry, he moved in to everyone who he struggled with. He did stand and yell at people about how stupid they were being, instead he told the people he disagreed with parables. He didn't set up shop and say I can heal come to me, he went to the people to bring healing. Jesus got close, very close to people.

In her own practice of faith the author of *Braving the Wilderness*, learned something profound about forgiveness, about moving in from the Christian faith. The Dean of the church she goes to said, “For forgiveness to happen something has to die.” That caused her to pause. Then her dean moved on to say, “Whether it is your expectations, your perception, your anger, your jealousy, your misunderstanding.” For forgiveness to happen, something has to die.

Brené Brown goes on to say, “In all of these religious traditions where love is easy, there is not enough blood on the floor.” This faith life we live, these survival skills of Jesus we are learning are hard work folks. The blood of Jesus is on our hands because we have to learn to let the things die that cause more separation, loneliness and division in this world.

I have heard said by folks, “The younger generation is disrespectful and flippant.” Move in folks, you might find they are compassionate and scared about the way the world is going. They want partners, siblings in the building work.

I have heard said by folks, “The older generation is greedy and just wants the world the way it used to be. Move in folks, you might find they are compassionate and scared about where the world is going. They are looking for partners, siblings in the building work.

But something’s probably going to need to die. Something of ours, something that God is asking us to let go of. Our expectations, our long held understanding, something.

I have a friend from the Philippines. They are so many languages in the Philippines I couldn't find an accurate number online. However, the primary language Tagalog. It is this incredible hybrid of different

language types. My friend Carlo, who is a District Superintendent in Alaska and a great leader shared a word with us. "Kapatid" it means sibling in Tagalog. There is only one word for sibling, not words from brother and sister.

I think Jesus intentionally used a parable about siblings to invite people to move in, and there is a reason Corinthians invites us to no longer see people from a worldly point of view. We are all siblings in Christ, we are Kapatid. Every being we encounter is a sibling and so we have a blood responsibility to move in, because Christ offered his life for this.

Friends, I know this work is controversial, and it is because the Christ survival skills of God's love are rebellious against a world that says we should be divided. But love is patient and kind and it is not envious or boastful, love and God's love is not about being right. We are all faltering fugitives at some point, and God invites us all to be brothers and sisters, children of God.

Shalom my friends, and amen