

Courage in the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging
March 17, 2019
Luke 13:31-35

- Have you ever recognized that sometimes your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness? For me, that has been “being too nice.”
 - I come by this trait naturally – nice is a part of my genetic make-up; I come from a nice family from Minnesota where “Minnesota nice” is just the way we do things!
 - And I like being nice. I like treating people with kindness and respect, doing what I can to help others. Good manners are something I highly value.
 - But sometimes I have been criticized for being TOO nice. Letting people take advantage of me or not allowing others to learn from their mistakes.
 - So over time, I have had to learn how to be kind, respectful, well-mannered, *nice*, while also setting clear limits and good boundaries.
 - I have also had to learn how to be little feistier...
- In today’s scripture, we see the feisty side of Jesus. Some Pharisees have come to warn him: “Get away from here! Herod wants to kill you!”
 - There is no doubt Jesus already knew this. First of all, Herod had already tried to kill him when he ordered the slaughter of all the baby boys in the region after Jesus’s birth. But God sent Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to Egypt as refugees, where they remained safe until God told them they could return.
 - Secondly, Jesus knew that Herod, who had been appointed King of Judea - King of the Jews - by Rome, ruled his kingdom by worldly standards. Money and power were his values; oppression and fear were his means of keeping order. Herod wouldn’t stand for anyone threatening that.
 - So when Jesus, a carpenter’s son from Nazareth, began going from village to village announcing the arrival of a new kingdom - God’s Kingdom - a kingdom ruled by love and peace; a kingdom where the last are first and the first are last, where the untouchables are touched, where the unclean are declared clean - well, any new kingdom was a threat to Herod’s kingdom and Jesus knew Herod would not tolerate that.
- So his response? “Go and tell that fox...”
 - A bit about Jewish slang: During that time, if you thought a man was great, you called him a lion. But if you thought a man was

- liar, a fake, a phony, you would call him a fox. Jesus is clearly throwing out an insult at Herod and the kingdom he has created.
- “You go tell that fox,” Jesus says, “that today and tomorrow I will be casting out demons and healing the sick. On the third day, I will complete my work.”
 - Jesus is saying, “you go tell that phony that my work will not, cannot, be thwarted. You have tried to kill me once, and you will try to kill me again. But I come in the name of the One who cannot be killed. Whose plans and ways cannot be thwarted. So I will call out evil, I will heal the sick, I will tell the Good News of a kingdom where all are welcomed to a place of true belonging. And when my work is done and my time has come - you will think you have stopped me, but really, that will only be the beginning of a new and wonderful thing God is doing!”
 - This Lent, we are talking about finding Courage in the Wilderness, and using Brene Brown’s book, Braving the Wilderness, as inspiration.
 - Brene Brown is a social researcher who uses grounded theory to do her work. This means that rather than trying to prove or disprove existing theories, she tries to understand the main concerns of her study participants and develop new understanding from there.
 - Her work around wholehearted living and embracing our vulnerabilities and imperfections and finding true belonging has been incredibly popular because these are main concerns for most people. Most of us want to know how to live life to the fullest, how to better love ourselves, how to more deeply and authentically connect to those around us. Especially in the deeply divided social context where we now find ourselves.
 - So what does that look like? What did Brene Brown discover about our Quest for True Belonging?
 - Before writing this book and more closely studying the concept of true belonging, Brene defined belonging like this: (quote) an innate human desire to be a part of something larger than us, which happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world. Our sense of true belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.”
 - But as she did her work, she discovered that that definition was incomplete because, she came to realize, true belonging is NOT something we accomplish with others...it is something that happens in our heart. What she discovered is that first and foremost, we must truly belong to ourselves and thoroughly believe in ourselves; we must understand and accept who we are so much so, that we are willing to stand alone. To, as she

says, "brave the wilderness of uncertainty, vulnerability, and criticism" while also remembering that we are at the same time connected to everyone else by the human story.

- We are all part of a bigger picture and a bigger plan that is built on our common humanity, shared trust, respect and love. NOT on the shared feared and disdain many of us experience all around.
- But doing that can be scary because it means that sometimes we will feel as though we are standing alone. We will experience criticism and rejection, which often feel like being in the wilderness. So why brave it?
 - Well because, Brene discovered, though people describe the wilderness differently, its notions are the same. It is a place of solitude, vulnerability, and searching. It's a place that feels both dangerous and breathtaking; a place that cannot be controlled - and yet, it is the most sacred place we will ever stand. The place where we will be our very best selves.
 - Braving the wilderness will involve being with people who are different than us. Learning to listen and have hard conversations. Finding joy, sharing pain, being more curious than defensive. We will have to get vulnerable, uncomfortable, and be willing to be present with others, all while never sacrificing who we are.
 - And by braving this place of wilderness, we will find true joy and true belonging.
- In other words, True Belonging is all about reflecting God's kingdom here on earth.
 - Jesus showed us this kingdom when he preached the Good News in all those villages - driving out demons, healing the sick, touching the untouchables, hearing the unheard, calling the unclean clean. Jesus did what he was sent to do - even though he was criticized, hated, killed on a cross. But nothing - not even the threat of King Herod - would stop him from doing what God sent him to do.
 - As Christians, we understand this sense of True Belonging and a willingness to Brave the Wilderness as reflections of who Jesus showed us we are and who we are to be:
 - If True Belonging comes from truly belonging to ourselves, then as Christians, we understand that that means we learn how to truly belong to God and to trust in who God has called and created each of us as unique individuals to be.

- For example, if God created you to be someone who is inherently nice to others, then embrace being a nice person! And learn how to be the best, most helpful, and appropriate version of nice you can be. Embrace your strengths – and your weaknesses. Learn and grow from them!
 - When we embrace who God has called and created us to be, we can then bravely and boldly build connections with others - even those who are different than us, believe differently than us, experience life differently than us - without forgetting or losing who we are.
 - We can then do the work God has given each of us to do and no person, or criticism, or threat can thwart that.
- So this Lenten season, as you find courage to bravely step into the wilderness of your life, I encourage you to remember who and whose you are:
 - You belong to God. God has created and called you to a special purpose. As Ephesians 2:10 says – “We are God’s accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned these good things to be the way that we live our lives.”
 - Go do these good things. Bring God’s Kingdom to the places where you are sent every day. Embrace your strengths and your weaknesses and learn from both.
 - And when you find yourself in the dangerous and breathtaking wilderness – know that it is a sacred place because it is a place where Jesus has already been and where Jesus is with you right now and where Jesus will help you find True Belonging in the one who created you and loves you and calls you. Don’t let anyone or anything thwart the good work and the great joy God has in store for you. Amen.