

“Radical Hospitality or Royal Stupidity?”

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Luke 15: 11-31

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On our marks – get set – grow!

That’s the heart of our church’s mission – to take the step from ‘*Good to go*’ to “*Good to Grow*.” For the next few weeks, we will focus on who Jesus is calling us to be at Wall Street United Church.



 Our Mission

- Radical hospitality (God loves All. So do we.)
- Transforming Relationship (coming into a relationship with Jesus, but also with other people changes you)
- Making a difference (having been loved and changed we go out and in small mustard seed ways we help to love and change the community and the world.)

1. Radical Hospitality
2. Transforming relationships
3. Making a Difference.

This morning I want to focus on the first part: Radical Inclusivity.

To do that, we go to the one of the best-known and loved stories of the Bible: the story of the Prodigal Son. It really is a story -- it didn’t actually happen. Jesus told this story to illustrate what the kingdom of God was like. It is sometimes called the ‘Parable of the Lost Son,’ but this story should probably have been called ‘The Lost Sons’ -- plural, because in it there were two lost sons.

There are three different characters: the free-spirited and irresponsible younger son, the dutiful and cheerless older son, and the shamelessly extravagant loving father. The story favours the younger son, and our society favours the elder son, but the father loves them both, with all their flaws -- and the father wants them both in his house at the party. The father in this story represents God.

The father throws a party for the younger son, but he wants both sons at the party -- and frankly, it’s a miracle that either son makes it at all. The

younger son may never have come home. He was so afraid, and very aware that the last thing he deserved was to be welcomed home. You remember the story: the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance before his father was even dead –which he had no business doing. It was a total insult, akin to saying: *I wish you were dead*. He takes the money and wastes every last penny on sex, drugs and rock ‘n roll. We don’t even know if this younger son is truly repentant for what we did – we don’t know if he really understands the pain and the humiliation he caused his father.

We do know he is starving and desperate, and it’s his desperation that drives him home. He’s hit rock bottom. He does understand that he doesn’t deserve to be home. His plan was not to come home as a son -- he knew there was no way he deserved that -- his plan was to come home as a servant or slave. The question that the younger son asks is: “*Do I belong?*”

I have met many people like the younger son: people who are very aware that they don’t deserve God’s love. I remember a few years ago asking a guy who at that time was in Brock Cottage to serve communion at the Celebrate Life service. His response was: “If you knew what I’d done in the past, you wouldn’t even let me *take* communion. I shouldn’t even be here.” Whether it’s because of something they have done or because of who they are, many people feel that they would never be welcomed or truly belong in God’s house.

This year the United Church of Canada is celebrating 30 years since the decision to allow practicing homosexuals to be full members in the church. It’s been 30 years since the famous (or for some infamous) 1988. 30 years was a long time ago, yet many churches like the Anglicans are just beginning to move forward on a similar decision. And of course many others actively preach against it. Things have changed ... and things have hardly changed at all.

The message that so many who are not in church hear is that the church is a place for perfect people, for straight people, for non-addicted people, for proper people, for ‘godly’ people. If you’ve ever been aware of your flaws and your brokenness ... If you’ve ever wondered how you’d be treated if they knew the real you; if you’ve ever asked “*Do I belong?*” then you have stood in the shoes of the younger son. My guess is that we’ve all stood in his shoes. Some of us live in those shoes, and some of us have stood in them briefly.

Then there is the elder son. Remember where he was when his brother came home and the party began? He was working in the field. He was working late into the day, just like he did every day, except the

Sabbath day. He comes home weary from work and finds out that his lazy, loser of a younger brother is home ... and not only that, but there's a *party in full swing in his honour!* It was not fair. It was not right.

Rev. Fred Buechner who is a Presbyterian minister and writer in the U.S. wrote this about the elder son. (I don't even understand the first two descriptions, but I'll leave them in for those of you who are way smarter than me!):

"The elder brother is Pecksniff. He is Tartuffe. He is what Mark Twain called 'a good man in the worst sense of the word'. He is a caricature of all that is joyless and petty and self-serving about all of us. The joke of it is that of course his father loves him even so, and has always loved him and will always love him, only the elder brother never noticed it because it was never love he was bucking for, but only his due. The fatted calf, the best Scotch, the hoedown could all have been his, too, any time he asked for them -- except that he never thought to ask for them because he was too busy trying cheerlessly and religiously to earn them."

Ooo burn!

You see, the elder son seems more worried about his father's stuff than about having a *relationship* with his father. All along his father has been there, but he's wasted that precious time working so hard in the field to *earn* the stuff that is all around him -- while his father gets older.

Through this story Jesus points out that even those on the 'inside'—the religious—can miss the party. Actually, that's who Jesus tells this story to: the insiders -- and that's a major theme of Jesus throughout the gospels. Like the older son, many churches or Christians want a God of fairness more than a God of scandalous grace, love and compassion. Instead of surrendering to and following God on God's terms, they want God on their own terms.

As he stands outside the door with his arms crossed, the question that the older son asks is *"Do I want to belong?"* If you've ever felt that you do so much and all you get is criticism, if you've ever looked at the church and thought 'If it's going to be like that, I don't know if I want any part of it', if you've ever asked *"Do I want to belong?"* -- then you have stood in the shoes of the older brother.

And then there is the father. The father loves and wants both sons at the party so badly that he is willing to bring shame and embarrassment on himself, and even to be deeply hurt by them both.

The story is clear about this: this father is not normal. He should have been so hurt by his youngest son who cared more about money than him. The younger son not only doesn't treasure the relationship with the father,

he doesn't even treasure his father's treasure. He wastes it all. But instead of responding in anger or by cutting all contact off from the son, the father *runs* toward Junior before Junior can even get close. Grown men rarely run today, and they certainly didn't run in Jesus' day. The father runs toward the son *not even knowing* what the son was going to say. Maybe Jr. was coming back to ask for more money? Before he even heard the "I'm not worthy" spiel, the father had gone running toward him, rejoicing and ordering up gifts of welcome worthy of a successful, beloved son returning home from a foreign land. I have no doubt the neighbours and the staff were talking... "What a fool!" "Doesn't he know his son probably hasn't changed and will likely hurt him again?"

It's not just for the younger son that the father makes a fool of himself. When the older son comes in from the field and finds out who is home and what is going on, he refuses to come in – he wants no part of it. What does the father do? Does he say 'That's his problem, he'll come in when he's ready'? No! He goes out to the elder son and the text says he *begged* his oldest to come in. No self-respecting father begs his sulking son to do anything! But this father does. This father doesn't care who sees him or what it sounds like -- he just loves his son, and wants him to come in.

If you've ever forgiven someone, if you've ever known someone's flaws and loved them anyway, if you've ever sacrificed what is yours and what you want in order to help lift someone else up, then you've stood in the shoes of the father. I know many of you have. We know Jesus did ... when he sacrificed his life to show us the Father's love, and the open door to heaven.

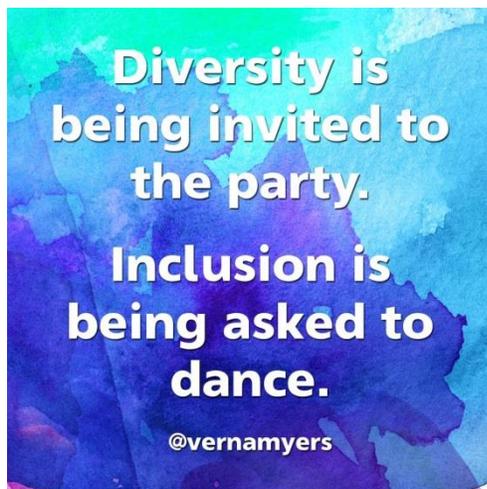
The story is also left open, almost a cliffhanger. We don't know what happens next. Does the prodigal son become worthy of this celebration? Does the older son suck up his pride and join the party? We don't know, and that's part of the point. *Neither of the sons got what they deserved, and neither do we! We get so much more!*

God will never love you any more or any less than he does right now. You who are desperately trying to get your life together will not be loved more when *do* you get it together. You who work so hard to be perfect will not be loved any more when you get to 'perfection'.

This is a story of grace. Grace is a gift that we can't pay for and don't deserve. No matter how hard you work, you can't work hard enough for grace or pay a sum of money big enough for it. Just as you are, you are invited into a relationship with the living God. The only cost I notice in this story is that to make it into the party, you have to leave one thing behind:

your ego / your pride. For the younger son to come home, he had to admit to himself that he messed up – he had no pride coming home cap-in-hand. We're not sure if the older brother makes it in to the party -- but if he did cross the threshold, he would have had to swallow his pride. The father who desperately wants both at the party has no pride whatsoever, only a shameless love.

Here's the hitch or the paradox. That incredible love will change you. If you decide to come home, if you decide to join the party, that party will change you.



There's a great quote by Verna Myers that goes like this:

*"Diversity is being invited to the party.
Inclusion is being asked to dance"*

We are being invited to dance! And if you open yourself to that love even a little, it will change you. We'll talk more about this transforming love next Sunday.

So come as you are. Come skeptical, come fun, come broken, come flamboyant, come with hurts, habits and hang-ups.

Come. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. – Revelation 3:20

As a church, Wall Street, let us walk in the shoes of the Father and share the good news: God loves ALL. So do we!