

Texts: Luke 15:11-32

Subject: The Welcoming Father

Theme: Like it or Not

Second Sunday after Pentecost; June 23, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven through our risen and living Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week, we began a 4-week series called “Where is My Neighbor?” Pastor Matt so eloquently shared about how we find the neighbor just at the tip of our nose - the ones right in front of us are our neighbors, and we are ones called to serve in so many ways in our daily lives. Our neighbors are the people we meet, the people we see, who at times need our time, attention, help, and more.

This week, the church has been filled with families - here for Vacation Bible School. We had three and four year olds participate with moms and dads, aunts, kids from age 5-10 singing and dancing, creating and learning. We had assistance from our middle schoolers helping to lead the younger ones from station to station. We had young adults planning, decorating, and leading the days’ events. And great adult leaders who helped it all come together, as we taught about how God is always good!

I’ve often shared that my first ministry is to my family - the people who live in my house, those ones under my immediate care. Extended family can be more difficult, but just as all good gifts come from God, it’s important that we care for all those special people that God has entrusted to us - *like it or not*. There may be exceptions - when abuse and violence cut family ties, when conflict is so deep, and suffering occurs, a safe distance is necessary. But I want to look at this example of a family that Jesus shares here.

This story comes in the context of two other parables - or stories that have a meaning, or several meanings, and we can find many truths here for sure. We hear the story of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. Together, Jesus uses these stories to teach about God's deep love and extreme grace, painting a picture of the *kin-dom* of God. Did you hear that? Not kingdom - *kin-dom*.

"Kingdom" is surely the word we hear in scripture, and there are many Kings - who most often are the oppressors in the stories of ancient Israel. The images in the gospels, as well as the book of Acts and Paul's letters, present a different kind of reality, where those who hear God's word and obey are truly family, (*Lk 8:21*) where people on the margins are included, where those in need are fed, the sick healed, and every need met. In this 'kin-dom,' relationships are intentional, centered in human need, and also in faith, grace, and love. Author Ellen Stevens writes that "Providing an impetus for reconstituting family not as authoritarian or patriarchal but one offering warmth, protection, and provision for lasting relationships, Kin-dom offers a communally-oriented foundation for mutuality, justice, and the restoration of faith and society."¹

Families are the first places we are called to serve our neighbor. And right here in America today, we hear stories of families separated at our Southern border, detained in unsanitary conditions. Families are separated by incarceration, with families of color suffering at a disproportionate rate. Many parents struggle with finding enough work to support the family, and many work without adequate insurance of medical leave.

Family is more than just parents and children, siblings, grandparents. Family are those people that have come into our lives and share with us joys and pain, who give

¹ "We are Family: Thoughts on the Kin-dom of God", accessed 6/22/19 at <https://medium.com/feminist-theology-2/we-are-family-views-on-the-kin-dom-of-god-fc63cc3b1a6a>

and receive, and rely on us, and we them. There are some that married into the family, some adopted, some that just come to visit and never leave.

When Ivy and I met, we both knew we wanted children. But that was about all we know. There was not really a plan. How many kids? Don't know. Seminary? Never heard of it. But two people fall in love, and eventually, you meet the family. When I met Ivy's family for the first time, her mother asked how old I was. Then she fed me. I met her dad and brothers - there was always food around. We flew to Florida to meet my parents. We caught a baseball game and went to the beach with my siblings. I met her aunt and uncle in Miami - more food. It's how they show love - it's how they welcome. It's great. Maybe your family is like that too. We visited my grandfather who was in the hospital at the time, and Ivy gave him a massage. He loved her from that moment on. And so did I.

It's not always rice and beans and *pollo empanizado*, though.

Families can come with conflict, too, as well as differences, disagreements, rivalries, and resentment.

This week, we hear this well known story from scripture about a family. I'm sure you know the story well, but I'll lift up just a few things here. The younger brother calls his father and asks for what is rightly his - his inheritance. In the cultural context, upon the death of the father the family property - though we don't hear about the mother in the story - would be divided into three shares. The oldest son would receive two portions, or 2/3 of the estate. The younger son would get 1/3. So, to say to the Father, "give me what is mine" is to wish he were already dead. The father doesn't seem to argue, and allows the insult, and gives the son what he asks for. He's setup in the story

to be a bad guy. The son takes it and goes far away, and wastes it all. He didn't earn anything, didn't build anything, didn't do any good. He squandered everything his father gave him.

This is true. Dr. Mark Alan Powell shares on this text that our own cultural context matters when we read this scripture (and others).² He asked folks from three places around the globe: North America, Russia, and a country in Africa why the son found himself in need, and got three different answers. Those from Russia noticed from scripture - *there was a famine*. Verse 14. He couldn't get any food. The African audience responded: no one would help him. It says it right there in the text - verse 15. Of course in verse 13 most from North America answered the way we most often do - he wasted everything. It's his own fault.

Have you had a family member that made you so mad you wrote them off completely? Have you refused to talk to them because you know you're right and they are wrong? Is there no possibility for reconciliation or room for forgiveness? Are you so sure?

We know what the young son does in the story - he insults his father. Deserts the family. Does some things the gospel writer can't even mention. Then, he comes home. He humbles himself. Does he repent and apologize? He doesn't even have time, before the father is running to grab him. To throw his robe around his lost son, to bring him back into the fold, to welcome him into the house and throw the biggest BBQ they've ever had to celebrate his return. Dr. Audrey West, from Lutheran School of Theology at

² Powell, Mark Alan. *What Do They Hear?: Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit & Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007)

Chicago writes, "the younger son "came to himself." We could say that he remembered who he was."³

The older brother in the story is sure the brother is undeserving, and when he gets wind of the feast taking place he refuses to make himself a plate. He won't share in the joy. There will be no welcome for his sibling. He's the one that's done everything right. He's followed the rules, waited his turn, worked hard. He didn't get a reward for good behavior, or doing what he's supposed to do. Why should he care that his loser brother is back?

My brother Josh and I are two and a half years apart in age. Growing up, we shared a bedroom for a decade and a half. He was taller and stronger, athletic - a better baseball player than me. We spent a lot of time together, and would, on more than one occasion, end the night with a fist fight. I think things got better as we grew older. But as adults, we are still very different. We don't agree on everything. There's still things that need to be healed between us. But he is my brother, and I love him. We are family. Those memories inform how Ivy and I raise our kids. We try to teach our children to be kind to one another. They wrestle. They compete with one another. Feelings get hurt sometimes. One is a biter. You can guess which.

They are us. Like it or not.

So I view my role as their father is to be the one to love them without condition, to communicate that love in word and deed, to give warmth, protection and provision, to share God's love with them, to teach them to serve one another and the neighbors

³ West, Audrey "Commentary on Luke 15:1-32" accessed 6/22/19 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3011

around them, to care for the world, and to remind them who they are - loved by me and their mother, and beloved children of God.

The older son does what is expected. He's not looking for a special reward. But gets resentful when the younger son seems to be rewarded, even though he's stepped out of bounds. The younger son hopes the father will allow him to come and work as a servant on the estate, knowing he has done wrong. The story is shocking - scandalous even - because the father welcomes the son - who was lost but is now found without expectation. He runs to show unconditional love, displays radical hospitality, gives more than anyone should imagine, and throws a welcome home party.

Neither son should have a party. The gift is undeserved. The love shown by the father is outrageous. To see this man running (they didn't do that in those days) - if anyone was watching this display, their jaws would be on the floor.

Families, at their best, remind us of who we really are. When we are with the people that know us better than anyone, that welcome us always with open arms, who would give everything to care for us, we are equally reminded of *whose we are*.

Jesus inaugurates the *kin-dom*, by calling to himself friends, and followers - disciples - who would be like family for him - ones for whom he would give warmth, protection, and provision, and above all love, grace, and abundant life. He does the same for every one of us. In baptism, we are adopted and called His beloved children. I guess, like it not, that makes us family.

Some may struggle with the idea that the church is a family. When our families remind us of painful realities, strained relationships, and bad memories, we may not want the church to be family. But like a true family, the church is body of Christ, called to

love and serve and give. To care for the little ones, to speak hard truth at times, to work together for justice, to pray together for peace, and to humble ourselves at the foot of the cross of Jesus. This is a family - where every time we come home, the Father runs out to greet us, to wrap arms around us before we can speak a word, and welcome us into the celebration of life.