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Candidating Sermon

Bethel United Church of Christ

May 12, 2019

“The Promises and Practices of Community”

Luke 15: 11-32

Wow. I thought it was overwhelming starting to work on this sermon… it’s even more overwhelming to be standing before you all this morning.

Let me start by expressing my gratitude. Gratitude to your wonderful search committee – which kept this search process running smoothly and who greeted me with such a warm welcome back in February and this weekend.

And gratitude to you all – members of Bethel United Church of Christ – gratitude for your excitement, interest, and openness, as we consider these next steps of the journey together. It is a gift to be here with you all.

Will you pray with me?

Creator God – God of our Parents’ parents, God of our Children’s Children, thank you for the way you are moving in our midst this morning. We pray you would pour out your spirit upon us, so we may hear more fully the things you are calling this community to. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of these gathered hearts, be acceptable to you, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

So, way back in January, when I had my second interview with your search committee, they gave me a list of questions to consider. You guys – these were tough questions – they knew what they were doing!

The very first question on the list asked me to talk about a scripture that is especially meaningful to me and why.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is the one I picked.

I picked this parable, because I believe it illuminates one of God’s promises to each of us – and it is THIS promise that should shape the promises and practices of our communities.

God’s promise to each and every one of you – to me – is that no matter what we do, no matter how far our choices take us from God, God is always waiting with open arms to welcome us home. Always.

With joy, love and abundant grace – the door into relationship with God is always, always open.

Out of God’s grace, out of this spirit of abundance, I believe we can find our own ways to live into community.

It is my hope that the church is a place where love is shared with all.

Where extravagant welcome is the norm.

Where celebration and lament are practiced authentically.

It is my hope that the church is a place of honest and brave conversations.

Conversations where our imperfections are acknowledged, our mistakes are confessed, and forgiveness and reconciliation are promised.

And it is my hope that these promises carry us right out into the world – where we practice them every day.

Love – extravagant welcome – celebration – lament – honest & brave conversations – confession – forgiveness…

These are the promises and practices of community.

So, that all sounds pretty easy, right?

No problem! Human community is never complicated.

Here’s why I really love this parable. Because this story makes it so clear there is nothing easy about it.

When the youngest son returns to his father’s household – certainly it is moving that his father runs out to greet him, meeting him halfway.

That’s a beautiful moment. And it illuminates something so important about God’s love for us – we can never be cut off from it, we can never mess it up, we can never lose it.

But it’s not where the story ends.

We’re human. Our stories are human. And so, the parable continues.

The elder son returns from the field and finds the house in celebration mode. Music! Dancing! Not what usually greets him at the end of a long day.

And so, he stops one of the servants to find out what’s going on – and that’s when he hears it.

This brother of his, who couldn’t wait to come into his inheritance, who left home, shirking responsibility, wasting resources – this is the brother who receives the party??

It’s unfair. And the eldest son makes sure his father hears about it.

Now, for a few years when I read this scripture, I found myself mostly in the younger son’s story. I didn’t squander money on gambling or sex per say, but I did throw a pretty good party on my parent’s dime while in college.

Now – at the wise age of 31 – with seminary behind me, two years in ministry under my belt – guess who I find myself most often relating to?

The elder son.

He’s right to be miffed about this party! He’s always been the responsible one, underappreciated, taken for granted. And yet, he never gets a big party. It isn’t fair.

Sometimes these days, I catch myself passing judgment on those colleagues of mine who don’t seem to be working as hard as me. Who seem to rely on God’s grace just a little more than they should, if you know what I mean. ;)

But church, here’s the thing I’m learning: when we get all wrapped up in focusing on what we “deserve” – it’s easy to not even notice the resentment building within us until it comes out sideways.

Until it stops us from extending a warm welcome to someone who desperately needs to be welcomed and loved.

Henri Nouwen wrote an entire book on this parable. In it, he finds himself relating to both sons. And he reminds us, “joy and resentment cannot coexist.”

It really can’t. Have you tried to feel both?

When the older son demands an explanation from his father – we get to my favorite part of this whole parable,

“Son, you are ALWAYS with me, all that is mine is yours.”

Son – there is enough of my love to go around. Enough for your lost brother, enough for you. Set no limits on my love and instead rejoice with me in the miracle before us.

If we get so wrapped up in who deserves what and the resentment that always comes up when life doesn’t work that way, we’re going to miss out on the good gift of God’s grace which is poured out on ALL of creation. We’re going to miss out on the joy.

We are all on a journey – a journey as Nouwen puts it that extends far beyond our few years on earth. And the One who created us is waiting for us to come home and tell the amazing stories of what we have learned.

The one who created us is running to greet us – no matter if we’ve gotten a little lost along the way, or if we’ve followed the straight and narrow all our lives. She will always be there to welcome us home.

As people of the church, as people of community, we have something to learn here.

We all have a bit of each son in us. Some of us lean a little more one way or the other – it’s true. But there’s a bit of both in all of us.

And there is enough of God’s love, more than enough of God’s love, for each and every one of us.

And because we are beloved, we must lean into these promises and practices of community.

We practice honest and vulnerable conversations. And we promise to hang in with each other through them.

We practicing acknowledging our imperfections and confessing our mistakes. And we promise to lean into forgiveness and reconciliation.

We practice extravagant welcome and radical hospitality for ALL of our neighbors. And we promise to celebrate with one another – and to hold each other through our times of lament.

And we practice trusting the promise that we are beloved recipients of God’s abundant grace. And we promise to share that love with this community and with the world.

Let it be so.