

## WELCOME HOME: A PILGRIMAGE TO BELONGING

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I recently attended the Spring concert of the Rugby Middle School 6<sup>th</sup> grade band, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade band, and the West Henderson High School Concert Band. These junior high and high school students were so impressive. It was especially fun to hear the difference between the 6<sup>th</sup> grade band and the seventh grade band; the progress made in one year is amazing. To hear these students perform made me proud to live in Hendersonville and to know that my tax dollars support such a high quality program. The most powerful moment that evening for me, however, was when the director of the high school band made this comment: “Everyone,” he said, “needs a positive reason to get up in the morning and to come to school. For many of these students, band is their reason because it’s a place in which they feel that they belong.” I love that.

I’ve been thinking a lot about the loneliness epidemic in our country, and the need that we all have to feel that we belong. What is it, I’ve wondered, that helps people feel that they belong? What keeps you and I from feeling that we belong? And what can we as a church do to be a community in which people feel that they belong?

Brene Brown says that “true belonging is the spiritual practice of believing and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world. True belonging is not about fitting in. True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are, it requires you to be who you are.”

The story of the prodigal son that Joan read earlier is a story of what true belonging looks like. It is story that reminds us of the internal

work that we must each do to cultivate this feeling of belonging, and it is a story that tells us of the importance of letting go of the untrue stories that we sometimes tell ourselves. And, it is a story that reminds us of the power that we each have to help others feel that they belong, to welcome them home.

The minister Rob Bell tells the story of the prodigal son this way: “A man has two sons. The younger one demands his share of his father’s inheritance early, and the father gives it to him. The son takes the money, leaves home, spends it all, and returns home hoping to be hired back as a worker in his dad’s business. His father unexpectedly welcomes him home, embraces him, and throws him a homecoming party, fattened calf and all.

It’s a party, however, that his older brother refuses to join. It’s unfair, he tells his father, because he’s never even been given so much as a goat so that he and his friends could have a party. The father then says to him “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost but has been found.

The younger brother has **his** own version of his story. As he heads home in shame after squandering his father’s money, he rehearses the speech he’ll give to his father. He’s convinced he’s no longer worthy to be called his father’s son. That’s the story he’s telling himself, the one he’s believing. It’s stunning, then, when he gets home and his father demands that the best robe be put on him and a ring placed on his finger and sandals on his feet. Robes and rings and sandals are signs of being a son. Although he’s decided he can’t be a son anymore, his father tells him a different story. One about return and reconciliation and welcome. One about being a loved son.

The younger son has to decide whose version of his story he's going to believe: his or his father's. His version in which he is no longer worthy to be called a son or his father's version in which he's a robe, ring, and sandal wearing son who was lost but has now been found.

Same, it turns out, for the older brother. There are two versions of his story as well.

He tells his father, "All these years I've been slaving for you and I've never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your money with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him!"

So much said in so few words. You kind of sense that he's been saving up these words for years, and now it comes out with venom.

In his version of events, he's been slaving for years, and he's never even been given so much as a goat. And most importantly, he claims that his father has dealt with his brother according to a totally different set of standards. He feels wronged, shorted, and treated unfairly.

The father, however, isn't rattled or provoked. He simply responds "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." And then he tells him that they have to celebrate.

In that one sentence: "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours," the father manages to tell an entirely different story about the older brother. First, the older son is not a slave and he could have had whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. Everything the father owns has always been his, which includes, of course, fattened calves.

Second, the father redefines fairness. **It's not that this father hasn't been fair with him; it's that this father never set out to be fair in the first place. Grace and generosity aren't fair; that's the beauty of grace and generosity.** And this father sees the younger brother's return as one more occasion to practice unfairness. The younger son doesn't really deserve a party—but that's the point of the party. That's how things work in this father's world. Profound unfairness is his calling card.

What this father does is retell the older brother's story, just as he did with the younger brother. The question, then, is the same question that confronted the younger brother—will he trust his version of his story or his father's version? Will he believe that he's never been treated fairly or will he believe what his father is now telling him – that it's been here for him all along.

Many of us have, like these two brothers, told ourselves a story about our ourselves that is not true, especially when we're feeling left out, lonely, or depressed. A story about our unworthiness. A story that we're not good enough. A story about our need to hustle for approval. I wonder if you have a story about yourself that is not true that you have been telling yourself?

Both of the sons in the prodigal son story believe the lie that the father's love is a conditional love, that it is love based on what they've done or not done. How many of us have experienced this in our relationships with parents, friends, and partners? And how many of us have been taught that we needed to win God's love, that if we acted right God would love us, and if we acted in other ways God would punish us, or at least be disappointed in us.

Like these brothers, we often forget that God's presence is not only with us, **but** within us. Rev. Eric Butterworth says "If you are asleep to the presence of God in you, then you're like the brothers in the prodigal son story. "But," he says, "when you come home to yourself, that is, when you wake up, and you come alive to the God within you, then God becomes very real to you. Not a spirit separate from you, but as a dimension of you. You can never be separated from God, because you are an expression of God."

In his book "Love Is the Way," Bishop Michael Curry writes: "I've come to see that the call of God is always a call to become the true you. Not an imitation of someone else. The true you: made in the image of God, deserving of and receiving love. Unselfish, sacrificial living isn't about ignoring or denying or destroying yourself. It's about discovering your true self—the self that looks like God—and living from that grounding. And to love others is to relate to them as someone made in the image of God, also."

The story of the prodigal son is a call to let go of the untrue stories that many of us have told ourselves, especially when we are lonely or sad or feel left out – stories that say we are unworthy or that we're not good enough.

The month of June is Pride month, and last Sunday we had a fantastic Pride Sunday. Last Saturday I went to Sam's Club to pick up the two cakes we had ordered for coffee hour. The cakes were decorated with rainbows and little pride flags, and we had them write "Happy Pride. You are loved" on the cakes. As you know, at Sam's you have to be checked out as you leave, to be sure that you have paid for the items in your cart. As I was leaving, the older woman checking my cart out looked at the two large sheet cakes. And then she said "Happy Pride?" She stood there a second, with a

puzzled look on her face, and I braced myself for what she might say. But then she looked at me and said “Oh, Pride... I hope you have a fantastic time.”

Although Pride month is about celebrating the LGBTQ community, I suspect that everyone in the world needs to be celebrated with a cake that says You Are Loved. Maybe that’s our job everyday, especially with ourselves and with the people with whom we struggle.

The poet John O’Donohue writes: “May all that is unforgiven in you be released. May all that is unlived in you blossom into a future, graced with love.” Friends, as you and I journey on this pilgrimage to belonging and home, may what is unlived in us blossom, and may we, like the father in the prodigal son story, welcome everyone home. May we help everyone, including ourselves, to know that they are loved, and that they belong. Amen.