

World Communion Sunday

October 1

Luke 15:25-32

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

Today is world communion, and, as churches around the world are celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, I've been thinking about this story that Jesus tells about two sons, a story that often focused on the son - known as the prodigal, but I think the story is just as much about the other son - the older brother - you know, the one who stayed home and helped his dad, and did all the right things.

The older son was probably not so different from the young Arthur Brooks, who, at ten years old, had a modest goal: to be the world's best French horn player. He practiced constantly; he was so focused on his music that he let other things slide. He didn't care about academics, and although he went to college he dropped out — or was it kicked out? — after only a year. That's when he hit the road with his French horn and his ambition. For a decade or so, Brooks lived his best life. He struggled to pay the rent, but he was having a great time. Eventually, he followed the woman he loved to Barcelona, and landed a job playing for the Barcelona Symphony. But in his mid-twenties, something about his playing began to change. Instead of getting better, he got worse. *Looking back now, he suspects he had a torn muscle.* But at the time, it was a mystery. He changed teachers, practiced harder, but the decline in his playing was undeniable. He simply couldn't hit the notes anymore. At barely thirty years old, Brooks had no idea where to go or what to do next. The life he had prepared for was no longer available to him. He was hopelessly lost.

Loss is a universal human experience - loss binds us together. There are losses of dignity, losses of agency, losses of trust, losses of spirit, losses of direction or faith, and, of course, losses of the ones we love. Loss is a universal human experience and Luke chapter 15 is full of them. In this one chapter, Jesus tells three parables of loss: a lost coin, a lost sheep, and a lost son. And in these stories, loss does not discriminate - it impacts a shepherd, a woman, and a wealthy landowner. Loss is a common experience no matter who we are. This chapter begins when a group of tax-collectors and sinners — people considered irredeemably lost — **keep coming to Jesus**. The religious leaders — the ones who worked hard to do all the right things all the time — find it very off putting when these lost souls seek out Jesus — especially when Jesus receives them with open arms. And so they exchange knowing glances, and grumble to each other under their breath. In response to this grumbling Jesus tells these three parables about the pain of loss and the deep and abiding joy that comes when something — or someone — gets found. The shepherd, the woman, the wealthy father — each of them rejoices when what they have lost is found — and they invite the whole community to join in the celebration.

But there is one character in the final parable — the parable of the lost son — that doesn't fit the mold, one character who isn't rejoicing at the end of the story: the older son. The son who doesn't squander his father's fortune on illicit adventures in a faraway land. The son who does all the "right" things, who works hard, keeps his head

down, never asks his father for anything. And yet, by the end of the parable, I would argue, the son who is lost is not the younger son who ran away, it's the older son — the one who never left.

At age 30, Arther Brooks had to reinvent himself. After two decades of striving to be the best French horn player in the world, he could no longer play professionally. So he started over. He went to college, and then graduate school, and ultimately earned his PhD. He now makes a living studying what makes people happy. And what he's learned is that after about age 65, half of the population gets happier and the other half gets unhappier. When Brooks first discovered this, he assumed the people, who became less happy as they aged, were the ones who **hadn't** achieved much, the ones who realized their time was running short and they hadn't achieved all they had hoped to. But that's not what the data showed. It turns out people who get less happy as they age are more likely to be, what Brooks calls, **strivers**, people who spend their early decades fixated on individual success — whether climbing a professional ladder or making a lot of money or raising high-achieving children. This propensity toward unhappiness in the second half of life is what Brooks calls “the striver's curse.” His research shows that people who are fixated on striving, on attaining success, tend to neglect relationships, so when they reach the second half of life, they discover they don't have the kinds of interpersonal connections that are a critical component of human happiness.

I hear this echoed in the voice of the older son. At the end of the parable the older son says to his father: ‘All these years I have been working like a slave for you... and when this son of yours came back, you killed the fatted calf for him.’ *Did you hear what he did there?* His relationship with his brother is so broken he can't even refer to him as “my brother” — calling him instead, “this son of yours.” The father restores the brokenness between his beloved sons, as he gently reframes their relationship: Son, you are always with me... but **this brother of yours** was lost and has been found. The question now is: will the older son accept his father's invitation to join the party, even if it means seeing his brother with whom he is so angry? Or will he get back to work trying to earn happiness by doing the “right” thing? We don't know. Jesus ends the story there...leaving us to write its conclusion.

One Sunday, a pastor preached a sermon on Psalm 23, focusing on the line ‘you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.’ The pastor interpreted this to mean that heaven would be a celebration where we would feast at God's table with our friends and *our enemies*. After church, a woman approached the pastor with a look of anger on her face. Pastor, she said, you know I respect you, but I do not accept the message of your sermon. There is no way I will be eating with my enemies in God's kingdom. That is not heaven to me. “No,” the pastor responded, “that would be hell for you.”

Today is World Communion Sunday, when Christians all over the world celebrate Communion and God has invited **all of us** to the party. Communion is being celebrated in every language and with all kinds of breads and cups and with all kinds of people — children and elderly, people with varying physical and intellectual abilities, people who've “sown some wild oats” and those who've always done the right thing. Communion is being celebrated today with equal passion by people in Russia and in Ukraine, by Conservative and Liberal, by denominations that ordain women and queer people, and in churches which believe to do so would send them straight to hell.

Communion will be celebrated by people who've gone to church their whole lives and by those who wandered in off the street this morning for reasons they can't really explain. All are invited to God's party! But, like the older brother, we have to decide: will we show up? Even if the sibling we cannot stand is guaranteed to be there — as the guest of honor?

Jonathan and Melissa Nightingale recall the night, years ago, when they left their apartment in Toronto after a long day of work, hungry and way too tired to make any decisions about dinner. It was, they said, "The kind of hungry plus tired combination where even the question, "what are you in the mood to eat?" is too much to navigate. It was in this state that [they] passed a chalkboard sign in front of a restaurant [they'd] never visited. In large letters, it said, "Let Us Feed You." Now they knew chalkboard signs outside restaurants shouldn't make you want to cry, but this one did — so deep was the relief of someone else taking on this Herculean task. They went inside and sat down. A server came over and asked them three simple questions: How hungry are you? Do you have any food allergies? Is there anything you don't like or don't feel like eating tonight? And then, just like magic, dish after delicious dish made its way to their table. Without them placing an order or ever seeing a menu. They came in, answered a few easy questions, and then enjoyed a feast.

They were lost, and they got found...and fed! **We** have all been lost, whether to greed or addiction or striving or certainty that our way is the only way. We have all been lost. But what also unites us is that we have all been claimed by God. Each one of us has a seat at God's table and a place card with our name and the words, "Let me feed you." Because we may have been lost to ourselves, and to each other, but none of us has ever been lost to God.

We don't know what the older brother decides to do, whether he accepts the invitation to join the celebration, knowing that his brother will be there too. We don't know if he is reconciled to his family. What we do know is that, **no matter who we are, no matter where we've been, no matter what mistakes we've made or how hard we've tried to do the right thing, God invites us to the party.** All we have to do is take our place with the rest of God's family, and enjoy the feast.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Rev. Debra Berg