**Cultivating Relationships, Letting Go of Self**

**Luke 15:11-32**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

March 22, 2020

I don’t know about you, but I’ve been feeling a little lost lately.  Nothing seems to be how it was just a few days ago. Suddenly, my college sophomore is home for the rest of the semester.  I don’t go to my office anymore. I don’t see my colleagues except over Zoom. I get my groceries by ordering them online and picking them up at Kroger.  My hands are chapped from near constant washing. I am preaching to you from home rather than in our beautiful sanctuary.

I usually think of myself as pretty adaptable, pretty resilient, and I am, but this has been a whole lot of upheaval all at once.  So, yes, I feel a little lost, displaced, disconnected. And I have the feeling that I’m not alone. Some of you may be feeling lonely or isolated.  Others may be overwhelmed at the prospect of home-schooling their kids for the next who-knows-how-many weeks. Others may be angry about being uprooted or disappointed because of cancelled plans.

Our human tendency when we’re feeling out of sorts is to turn inward and focus on our own self-interests - which often looks like nurturing our angst or anger, disappointment or fear.  Yet, as people who follow Christ, we have an example of another way to respond - to focus not on ourselves but on our relationships.

A few weeks ago, we began the season of Lent and, with it, a sermon series called “Cultivating and Letting Go”.  The idea is that Lent is a season when we can take an honest look at our lives and consider what stands between us and God.  When we name those things, it becomes easier to let them go. And when we let them go, we have room in our hearts and psyches to cultivate new growth and new possibilities for our lives.

When I put together this series, I originally titled today’s sermon “Cultivating Relationships, Letting Go of Grudges” and then I changed it to “letting go of entitlement” and then I thought maybe “letting go of resentment”.  But, as the last week has passed and we’ve seen the spread of Covid-19 and learned about social distancing and flattening the curve, I decided on “letting go of self” by which I really mean letting go of selfishness, self-orientation, self-interest so we are free to find creative ways to be in relationship with others.

This story that is our scripture reading today is one of the most well-known in the Bible.  Most often, preachers use it to talk about forgiveness and the abundance of God’s grace, but I’m going to put a slightly different spin on it.  We often hear this called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but in my Bible, it’s called the Parable of the Lost Son. In my opinion, it’s really a story about two lost sons.  Two young men who have gotten so wrapped up in the themselves and the circumstances of their lives - in their desires and envy, resentments and fear - that they have lost sight of what really matters - their relationships with God and each other.

On the one hand, you’ve got the younger brother who is really all about himself.  He is almost a stereotype - the self-absorbed young man whose interests are limited to drinking, parties, and women.  He asks his father for his inheritance, and then leaves his father and brother, his home and farm, to go off and pursue his desires.  Soon, he is lost to his family entirely. Of course, eventually, the money runs out, and at just that time, a famine comes. He ends up working for a pig farmer and has nothing to eat.  Hungry and alone, he realizes he would be better off working as a hired hand for his father. At least he would have food. So, he sets off with the intention of apologizing to his dad and asking for a job.

Meanwhile, back at the farm, the older brother has been working diligently for his father - caring for the animals and the fields, very consistent and responsible.  It’s not surprising he might feel a bit resentful - after all, his brother left him with twice the work to do while he was off gallivanting. When the younger brother comes home and their father throws a party for him, that resentment explodes into anger and indignation.  He, too, is lost - he wanders away from relationship into self-pity and isolation.

The person at the center of all of this is, of course, the father, who understands that no matter what sense in which you are lost, returning home is about returning to right relationship with God and those around you.

Right now, we’re all feeling lost, and it’s going to be very tempting to turn inward and focus only on ourselves, our desires, our feelings of anger, disappointment, fear or resentment.  The longer this time of social isolation and distancing continues, the longer our lives are disrupted, the harder it’s going to be to stay positive. Yet, what is going to get us through this Covid-19 pandemic is getting out of ourselves and focusing on our relationships with each other.

We know that is literally true.  We have learned this week how very interdependent we are and that the way to stop this pandemic is for all of us to put our collective health before our individual wants and needs.  Instead of running out to the store on a whim, we need to stay home. Instead of going out with friends, we need to practice social distancing. No matter whether you are sick or not, vulnerable or in the best of health.  What an amazing, beautiful gift to come from this dark and scary time! We have the opportunity to save lives of people we don’t even know by remembering that we are all caring for each other.

However, I think this practice of cultivating relationships and letting go of self is not only good for our physical health but for our emotional and spiritual health, as well.  We can avoid the pitfalls of self-absorption and negativity by focusing not on what we are losing as individuals but on caring for our relationships at home and in the world.

Here is a great example.  It couldn’t happen now given everything that has changed in the last week, but it was a beautiful story of looking beyond one’s self to the needs of the community at the time.

Some of you know that my only child goes to Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana.  Earlham was scheduled to be on spring break this week, so last week, students were busy with exams, papers, and projects that were due before the week of vacation.  Then, late last Thursday morning, the president of the college announced that they would close the campus for the rest of the semester. No one really expected this.  Students and faculty alike thought classes might go online for a few weeks; not that they would all have to go home. So, when the president announced the campus was closing, there was a palpable sense of grief and anger on campus.  Students and faculty were upset. International students had to figure out whether they were even allowed to re-enter their home countries. Students who had plane tickets to fly home for spring break had to figure out what to do with all their stuff.  Professors were trying to learn as quickly as they could about teaching online so they could give some sense of stability to students before they left campus.

And in the midst of all of that, some time on Thursday afternoon, a couple of students got an idea.  They realized that the seniors were not going to have a graduation. After three and three-quarters years of hard work, they would not get to walk across a stage and receive their diplomas.  They would get no sense of closure or opportunity to celebrate their achievement.

So, the students approached the faculty and administration about having a mini-graduation anyway.  In less than 24 hours, the college community put together graduation. They had some decoration left from a TedX conference the week before.  Some of the students had already gotten their graduation gowns. Many of the faculty dusted off their robes and hoods. The choirs and bands pulled out music they could perform without too much rehearsal.

And on Friday at noon, the community gathered.  They gathered to listen to music. They prayed - hearing four different prayers in four different languages from four different faiths.  And they shared their stories. The president spoke, a few faculty members talked about how much they had seen students learn and grow, a few students spoke about their Earlham experience and why it was so special.  After that, every senior walked across the stage and received a certificate that said, “The class of 2020 confers upon each other an almost Earlham degree as we have now completed 3.75 years of degree requirements. Affirmed this thirteenth day of March by Big Earl and the squirrels.”  Big Earl is the school mascot on a campus filled with squirrels.

It didn’t matter that they didn’t receive their actual diplomas or that there wasn’t a special graduation speaker flown in from out-of-state.  It didn’t matter that there weren’t special decorations and that some students didn’t have robes and caps to wear. What mattered was the cultivating and care of the relationships that weave together this community.  They needed to be together to celebrate each other and to say good-bye. With that one event, a campus filled with lost, confused, overwhelmed students and faculty began to heal and to feel whole again.

It’s never been harder - or more important - to be in relationship with each other.  How will you cultivate relationships in your life during this time when we are all stuck in our homes?  How will you care for those you love that you are now spending way more time with? Or those you love who are far away?  And how will you care for our community? What emotions and self-interest do you need to let go of to have the hope and positivity to focus on God and on the people around you?

If you are feeling lost right now, if you find yourself slipping deeper into frustration, anger, fear, or disappointment - cultivating your relationships is what will bring you home again.  Write a letter, call a neighbor, tell your kids you love them. Donate food, buy someone’s groceries, offer to proofread a college student’s papers. There are so many ways we can help each other and all get through this together.

May it be so.  Amen.