

Sermon – Proper 20 – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

Homecoming Sunday – Luke 16: 1-13

Welcome home on this Homecoming Sunday! Welcome back to this community of faith that has been a home to so many souls over its almost 170-year history. The church of course is not the building per se, but it is the people that gather within the building. It is us! It is all of us who find a sense of belonging here with God and with each other.

Belonging, being part of something larger than ourselves is a core part of our humanity. Jesus calls us together, calls us from our lives no matter where we are, he calls us to come together for mutual support, care, love and understanding, which all means community.

Homecoming is such an American tradition. It dates back over 100 years, to colleges that staged football matches to celebrate community, and to reunite alumni with the then current student populations.

Now in villages, towns and cities all over the country September means homecoming, welcoming back students to school, with parades, coronations of homecoming Queens and Kings, and football matches and tailgate parties. It is truly a community celebration.

The celebration of homecoming was elevated to a new level last year. You may not have heard of Coachella in the Colorado desert in California, but you have probably heard of Beyoncé. Last year Beyoncé became the first African American woman to headline at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, the world's largest such festival. Beyoncé is a tour de force when performing in any concert. Her performance last year at Coachella was even more extraordinary as she built her show around the culture of Homecoming.

For Beyoncé, taking up the theme of Homecoming was a statement on belonging. As the first African American woman to headline the festival she found a deep sense of recognition and belonging in the world of music and art's culture. Homecoming also allowed her to celebrate the role of historically black colleges and universities in the lives of African Americans, especially as places of higher education to a community that had been shunned from educational institutions because of racial prejudice. These colleges and universities provided a much-needed place to belong, where learning could be nurtured in safe and stimulating surrounds. Fraternities and sororities flourished in these institutions and continue to provide connection and support to alumni all over the country.

Belonging is a yearning for all of us. We have a desire built in to us for connection with others for mutual relationship. For the most part our yearning to belong connects us in healthy ways to other people who desire to similarly share aspects of their lives. For others this yearning for connection and belonging drives them to groups where unhealthy relationships flourish and exploitation leads to corrosive and destructive ways rather than joyous and uplifting ways.

Belonging is an antidote to loneliness, a growing epidemic in the world, especially the western world where family culture is breaking down. In 2018 the government of the United Kingdom appointed its first Minister of Loneliness, a recognition that loneliness was harmful to society and required the focused attention of the government to help overturn isolation and to try to connect people with others. More and more European countries are moving in this direction.

Loneliness, certainly chronic loneliness, has been proven to be as bad for our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It is a major challenge for society and we, as a faith community, have a role to play as a welcoming community. We are a place founded on belonging and we invite everyone to find connection in this community.

Jesus, our role model as the son of God, lived a life focused on gathering people together, especially the lost and lonely, the outcasts of society, those excluded from the mainstream cultural and religious groups. Jesus saw those about him that suffered by being excluded. The poor, the widows, the sick, the dying, those with mental illnesses and those with greedy hearts like the infamous tax collectors. Jesus saw them all and by seeing them, he connected with them and welcomed them into a new community he was building, a community of mutual belonging founded on love and compassion, justice and mercy.

So welcome again to this Christ centered community, founded on God's love for all, and perpetuated by each generation of those that find belonging here.

In a Holy Spirit driven coincidence, we can find the role of a man's desire for belonging in the often-perplexing parable set as our gospel reading today. This is the fourth parable in a series recorded by Luke in Chapters 15 and 16 that center on loss, seeking, compassion, mercy and connection in community. This parable is often seen as an outlier, different from the other three but several theologians, of which I agree, see it as a doublet to the parable of the prodigal son. Both parables center on the squandering of possessions. Both protagonists hatch a plan to fix their problems that centers on conspiring ways to reconnect with either family or neighbors. Both end in reconciliation, mercy, and forgiveness despite everything that's happened before.

The parable of the unjust manager challenges the norms of society where masters were cruel, and the servants were treated badly. In this parable it starts out that way as the master catches on that his manager has been less than honest in his management of the master's business. The master predictably demands an answer before he terminates the steward's employment.

The manager unpredictably I feel, doesn't focus on being angry and getting revenge for what might be felt as an unjust action by the master, he rather focuses on how he can deal with his predicament and still find a place of welcome with the families of his village. So, he sets about to negotiate settlements with the suppliers of his master's goods, however on discounted terms. The end result of his settlement plan is that the master congratulates him for his shrewd actions. This is the perplexing part.

Bernard Brandon Scott, in his book *Hear the Parables*, concludes his analysis of this parable with these words. “The hearer now has no way to navigate in the world; its solid moorings have been lost. Are master’s cruel or not? Are victims right in striking back? By a powerful questioning and juxtaposition of images, the parable breaks the bond between power and justice. Instead it relates to justice and vulnerability. The hearer in the world of the kingdom must establish new coordinates for power, justice and vulnerability. The kingdom is for the vulnerable, for masters and managers who do not get even.”

If the motivation of the manager in settling the master’s debts was driven by revenge, then that would not be merciful in Jesus’ eyes. However, if the motivation of the manager was both to ensure he was not ostracized in the community and that his master came out of the situation with his reputation intact and his honor in the community maintained, then in a roundabout way this was a merciful act of the manager.

What we learn in our life of faith is how Jesus calls us to constantly recalibrate our lives toward compassion and mercy and away from retribution and revenge. We are the children of light Jesus refers to, that have experienced the gracious mercy of God as revealed to us and hopefully are able to show similar foresight to the manager but for a different set of values and for a different future. We are asked to use the wealth for which we have been blessed to build relationships that anticipate, and participate in the life of God’s Kingdom.

When we are experienced as a community expressing mercy and compassion to all, welcoming everyone to the banquet of the lamb, we are then a true place of God’s love and compassion, a true place of belonging. For this we give constant thanks for Jesus’ life and ministry of teaching that helps us to see a way of living in this world that lifts us up rather than drags us down.

The Church of St Luke and St Matthew is our spiritual home. We all gather together to celebrate Jesus’ life through common worship and praise, learn about living a better life than the world about us would have us live, and to share in this eucharistic meal that binds us together and nourishes our souls. It is here in this community that you will find a spiritual home, very much always a work in progress, as we seek to be more and more welcoming, where we all can be open and vulnerable in a place of shared companionship and faith.

So once again welcome home!

Amen