

“Come on Out!”

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October 12, 2014 – Luke 15: 11-32

Introduction

We’re all pretty familiar, I think, with the story of the Prodigal Son. It’s probably one of the most read of Jesus’ parables and one that we can usually find ourselves in at some point in our faith journey. We’re not unlike the prodigal, his brother, or the father. The characters are not unlike our own families sometimes and maybe that is how the text connects us with the LGBT Community, whom we celebrate with in the month of October. Just as a fair warning, I’ll be weaving in some pop culture references along the way. So in the words of Tina Turner’s *Proud Mary*: Listen to the story now.

The Text

What is probably most striking about this story is that the younger son asks his father for his inheritance while his father is still alive, trumping the right of inheritance of the elder son. The right of inheritance of the elder son is a part of the social code in Ancient Israel. It’s hard to say why he is doing this—perhaps he has become disillusioned, perhaps there is something between him and his father, or between him and his brother, or maybe another member of the family. Perhaps he feels ready to strike out on his own and make his own mark on the world. This may well be the viewpoint, looking from our 21st Century thinking; yet it is nevertheless interesting—and problematic—that the younger son is essentially looking at his father as already dead.

The younger son goes out into the world and essentially blows everything his father has given him. So not only has he thought of his father as dead, he has essentially proven it now. And now the moment of realization hits him—his father gave him so much, a great part of his own livelihood, a great blessing, and he has wasted it. He might as well be the lowest of the low: a servant to his father. Sure, he might go home and say, “Hey Dad, I’m back and it just didn’t work out going away.” But that wouldn’t be true to what happened and the loss of everything his father had given him. It wouldn’t be true to the love his father showed in giving him his inheritance early. In “coming to himself”, the son realizes that his father still might love him. Maybe then, he ought to reconcile with him, just as he has reconciled with God.

He comes home. His father is moved by his contrition and restores this lost son to his home. The father loves his son so much that he overlooks the significant loss that he has incurred through his son’s folly—not to mention the personal insult. He unconditionally forgives his younger son. However, his elder son, who ought to have inherited much when his father passed and now will only inherit a little, is rightly angry. True, he can be viewed as selfish and

uncaring about what happened to his brother, yet can we blame him? I mean, after all, he did blow half the family money. Rivalry between brothers is also a not uncommon theme to Jesus' hearers. Yet his father says to him, "come on out and be restored to the family, just as your brother is". We don't know what happens after that, but what the father has offered both his estranged sons is a restoring grace.

This story is about what is lost, just as much as what is restored through the grace of God. The father loses a son, then gains him back, only to lose another. Recall that the story does not say whether or not the elder son comes in to the celebration or remains outside. The two stories that precede this story in Luke's Gospel are the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. God, in all his[∞]her¹ ways notices when even one of the family has been lost and when one of the family strives to return what has been lost to the fold. The people of Israel know God's love, but she[∞]he also desires restoration with a lost creation.

Personal Example

My Coming Out story is intimately connected with my journey into ministry. I knew in 2007 when I finally accepted the call—particularly to "Come on Out!" to Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.—that I was also harboring a secret. Something I'd been trying to bury since I was thirteen. Except the problem was, it kept finding a way to surface.

The Thanksgiving before I left Winona for Washington, I was talking with a friend over the forums of a *Star Trek* fan-film I watched on the internet. I made a comment that on the surface made me appear straight. My friend sent me a private message that wasn't meant to alarm me, but it did anyway: "I thought you were gay." I knew I was, but I wasn't at all ready to admit it, let alone acknowledge it. I was going to go to seminary next fall and there were no such things as gay pastors. So I denied it to my friend, but he replied, "If you ever find out otherwise, I'd love to be more than a friend to you." It was a nice thing to say and I thought that was the end of it. Except when I woke up three days later in my Dad's spare room in quiet tears. That morning, before anyone in the house was up, I finally said to myself, "I'm gay."

Once again, though, I couldn't say that to anyone. It was easy to bury my secret in the great lie that many LGBT persons who are maybe I'm bi and I'll still have a girlfriend. This way I can still be a Christian pastor. Yet, all this time, I'm still talking with my friend from the *Star Trek* forums via instant messenger, the phone, and webcams. I'm getting to know this wonderful, faith-filled man, who also happens to be gay. I can't say it out loud but I'm falling in love with him. We spend a week together when he comes to Winona to meet me in person. I've grown comfortable talking with him, and my secret finally comes out. It feels great to have finally said it. Even though I'll still deny it for a little while longer. I told another person that I'm gay.

¹ The "∞" should be read as "and".

And we even share a kiss. You might know the song by Katy Perry that says “I kissed a girl and I liked it”? Well, I kissed a *boy* and I liked it. More than anyone I’d been with before.

I move to Washington and am almost immediately confronted with the fact that I can no longer bury this part of me—a part of me that has always been. My friend, now my boyfriend, has been with me, supporting me in this journey to seminary. I can’t ignore this dilemma anymore, because it is hurting the man I am growing to love deeply. However, I have to “Come on Out!” to my family and friend. I have to “Come on Out!” to my church.

Only a month into my first semester of classes at Wesley, I meet with the Dean of Admissions and come out. I feel an awful lot like the prodigal son, begging for forgiveness from his father—only I’m expecting to be told that I need to withdraw from seminary. The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* states that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings” (at the same time that it acknowledges that all persons are “of sacred worth”). But like the father, the Dean tells me how plenty of gay and lesbian students have studied at Wesley and gone on to thriving ministries. Okay, so I know that I could just be quiet and take the road set out before me, but that would not be true to the man I’d grown to love and would soon marry; the man I had finally come out for.

I chose not to go that route. I was called by God to serve his∞her people and I would do so authentically and openly. That call didn’t go away when I came out of the closet; it was strengthened. I would live my life as an openly gay man, proudly, with my husband, Tobey, by my side. Yet, I could not “come home” to the Methodist church. I needed to “Come on Out!” to a new church home—one that not only welcomed me, but welcomed my call to serve in ministry. It took a while and I still had to go through more hardship, but I finally reached the goal of ordination with my church family here at First Congo Winona.

Corporate Living

This is my story, but what about the stories of other LGBT persons, persons who still feel nothing but persecution on the part of those who claim the name “Christian”? LGBT persons just achieved a monumental victory for equality under the law, yet we do not hear the success of scores of Christians who do welcome LGBT persons and celebrate their love through marriage. So many voices in the LGBT community share stories of scorn or expulsion at the hands of churches. Many of my LGBT friends cannot understand how I can be a part of a community that “does nothing but hate me.” I am called an “Uncle Tom” or a traitor to the cause. At times I imagine, we, in the LGBT community, feel like the prodigal son, but we cannot return home.

For some who have tried, they return to a father who instead of forgiving his son and offering grace, makes the prodigal son a slave and shuns the familial bond. The father listens to the older brother who says, “This son is unworthy of your love and forgiveness because he did

not adhere to the beliefs you supposedly hold dear.” The voices for justice—for grace—are silenced. Instead, we hear from those who feel the growing legal acceptance of same-sex marriage and of LGBT is nothing more than “judicial activism at its worst” or the moral degradation of society through popular culture. TV shows like *Modern Family* or *Glee* don’t portray true Christian ideals. We hear the voices of those who still claim that being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender are all “lifestyle choices”, which can be overcome with a commitment to Christ and a strict adherence to a literal interpretation of the Bible.

In the early years of the Christian church, there were men (and likely women) who wrote documents in defense of the church; to justify the existence of the church in a secular world. They are often called “apologists”. These days though, the word “apology” has come to mean an attempt at righting a wrong. So often in the past couple of decades, the Christian church has not acted in love and justified those actions in the name of a “loving Christ” toward LGBT persons. Perhaps it is time for a new “apologist”, one who seeks to right the wrongs inflicted by the church and justifies it with the deeds, not the words, of a loving Christ. The Christ who welcomes us back into the fold when we feel the bonds are broken. The God who says, “You are mine, in all your fabulousness, in the ways that you are bringing out the image of me that I put inside you, and that I love you for!” The Spirit who still inspires you to do good despite a world still grappling with hate and fear.

I cannot make an apology for Christianity as a whole. I cannot make an apology for every person who calls LGBT people “disgusting” or a “perversion of God’s will”. I can only apologize for my shortcomings in standing with you, my brothers and sisters. I have known how “it gets better”, particularly in the church, but I have not always proclaimed this as proudly as I proclaim that I am gay. What I can do is share my hope that I will be better as the church is becoming better.

Yes, it is true. There are churches that are better. There are churches out there that don’t subscribe to a literalist interpretation of the Bible and not only welcome LGBT people, but will ordain them as ministers in service to Christ’s people in the world. We just don’t get to hear from them that often in the press.

Why is this? There are nearly 1,200 churches in our tradition, the United Church of Christ, alone who refute these claims. Numerous Christian denominations as well as other faith traditions in the world have reexamined their tenets, finding that a literalist interpretation cannot stand in our interconnected world. They have looked into their hearts as well as their texts and found that God’s heart is larger than our limited, narrow expectations of it. Our churches make commitments to welcome everyone, yet it is still difficult to extend that welcome; to overcome the stigma of Christianity. We feel like the goal is within sight, yet we must still scale the mountain to arrive.

Yet, we can be the song of welcome that overcomes the screams of hate and intolerance. The church must become the father that welcomes its prodigal sons and daughters

home. The church must “come on out” and dialogue with the older brothers who chide us for welcoming home our lost younger brothers. Maybe they will come in, perhaps not. Yet we offer grace regardless. We offer love regardless. And maybe this voice speaks louder than the silence us Christians who affirm LGBT persons receive in the press.

The younger son comes out to himself when he realizes his father’s grace in giving him his inheritance before he has died. The father extends his grace to his son in the love he shows by accepting him back into the family unconditionally. He also extends his love to his elder son, by coming out to him and welcoming him back into the house to reconcile with his younger brother. This is what God is about—this is who God is. God loves her∞his creation so much to send the grace of love to reconcile us together. Yet it is up to us to accept that love.

For those of us that belong to the LGBT community, in all of its myriad of expressions, we must accept that we are loved. Only then can accept we accept the grace God offers. This is what Christ taught us, reminding us in the Great Commandment: Love God first, but then love your neighbor as much as yourself. For our allies, our deeds must match our words; we cannot be a church of welcome that remains content in our safe place. We must go out and meet with those who feel that Christianity has relegated them to a place among the pigs, like the younger son after the inheritance is gone. We must “come on out” and show our love for our LGBT sisters and brothers. And it all starts with love.

Conclusion

In a short time, we will be invited to “come on out” to the Table. For some, this will be a familiar place; a place of welcome. For others who have not been welcomed or felt unworthy of this place, this will be unfamiliar and strange. I hope that you will know that this Table is for all, the worthy and unworthy alike; because this is the Table of Love. Come on out to be reconciled, if you wish. Come on out to love. And in the words of the “supermodel of the world”, America’s most beloved drag queen, RuPaul: “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else? Can I get an ‘Amen’ in here?”

Amen!