

“Coming Home and Coming Out”
A sermon by the Reverend Lindsey Becker
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 15:11-32
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Third Sunday in Lent

At the risk of losing what little pastoral authority you still see in me, I want you to picture this: a group of gay seminarians a few beers in huddled around laptops in a local Austin bar - frantically hitting refresh on twitter feeds - our peers and allies across the nation are giving us updates on the presbytery votes about 10A.

Slowly, results were pouring in. I remember the anxiety like it was yesterday. Little cheers and toasts were made every time it passed in one presbytery. Eye rolls and petty jokes were made to cover up the pain when it didn't pass somewhere else. We noticed as the night wore on that there were more toasts than eye rolls and we made one last grand toast. It had happened. 10A had passed!

I picked up my phone and called my mother.

“Mom? We did it! 10A passed! The PC(USA) officially allows gay people to be ordained ministers so I guess it's time to tell you I'm gay.”

There was a slight pause and then my mother wisely responded, “Why don't we talk about this in the morning when you haven't been drinking?”

For the record, despite my severe lack of tact, we talked later and she accepted me.

Though I'm paraphrasing, that captures the general flow of the phone call and that was the first time I came out to my family.

That was my first experience as the prodigal queer. Yes, you heard me. It's time to queer up the bible.

You see, the New Testament developed as a collection of documents written by a misunderstood, distrusted minority as they struggled to see how they could fit into their broader society. They filled it with messages of consolation, expectation, and liberation, as they encouraged one another to remain united in the face of oppression.

There is nothing more queer to me than remembering this truth.

You see, being on the journey to discover my queerness has connected me more to Jesus than any church experience has. When I think of Jesus dragging his cross and being humiliated in front of crowds, my brain flashes to stories from people I know and people I've never met who have been publicly humiliated and shamed for being queer. When stories of Jesus being nailed on the cross are told, I think of Matthew Shepard being beaten and left tied to a fence to die because he was gay. When I read about

the women mourning and cleaning Jesus' grave, I think of the countless families who are doing the same because their loved ones are murdered for being trans women of color.

Every murder, every hate crime, every vile word hurled at queer and trans people is a re-creation of the cross. Jesus was humiliated, mocked and tortured to scare a minority. I can picture the Roman soldiers pointing to the Jews and saying, "You're next, queer," as they hammer the nails into Jesus' hands.

So when I read the prodigal son, I read it through a queer lens. I put my queerness and my queer experiences into the story.

Here's what we usually hear when we're told what the prodigal son is about:

The prodigal son is asking for an unfair share and is disrespectful.

The prodigal son is a sinner in need of mercy and forgiveness.

The prodigal son was wasteful, reckless and spent time with prostitutes.

The prodigal son received more grace than he deserved.

The prodigal son broke up his family.

I have heard different variations of each of these said about queer and trans people over and over again.

"We're having Easter lunch with your grandmother so I need you to be a girl today."

"You need to repent and ask God to forgive you so you can stop being gay."

"The gays have AIDS because they sleep around and do drugs."

"You should be grateful we still let you stay here even though you're gay."

And, my favorite, said all too often after a kid comes out: "How could you do this to our family?"

These interpretations are surface-level and intentionally simplified. They're harmful and misdirected because they're deflections that allow those who encounter queer and trans people to justify pre-existing beliefs and realities. They allow people to reject the hard work of reconciliation Jesus asks of us - the kind of radical acceptance and love that forces us to grow in faith and in life.

Parables are meant to spark this work within us. Jesus tells stories not to entertain or confirm our ways of thinking. These stories are told to flip everything we've known upside-down so we can re-examine ourselves in ways that bring us closer to God.

Most queer interpretations of this story put the queer or trans person in the role of the prodigal son. I certainly do that with myself. I went out into the world confused, struggling and, to be honest, a mess. In my struggle to figure myself out, those looking in from the outside would probably have described me much like they describe the prodigal son. I was wasteful, reckless, impulsive...I didn't feel like I was home whether I was living at home or off at college...and my parents continually showed so much more grace and forgiveness than I felt I deserved.

We all, in certain ways, do this. Learning by making mistakes is a part of life. But adding a queer identity crisis brings a different element. There's no framework for what we deal with. The whole concept of coming out exists solely because the world is focused on everyone being straight unless we figure out something is different. This was especially difficult for me because I'm pansexual. Much less common, I didn't have anyone in my life to show me the way, let alone any awareness that this was even a thing.

When I tried to describe it to friends, I received a variety of responses. They ranged from, "Stop being greedy and pick a gender," to "Ew, I don't like that." Hearing that from straight people was hurtful but expected. The worst part was hearing it from other gay people. Even within the community that is supposed to support me, hold me and help me grow into myself, I was an outcast.

Ocean Vuong, in his poem "The Prodigal Son's Lament," puts himself in the shoes of the prodigal son as a gay man. Through heartbreaking words, he tells us of how it felt to have the letters he wrote to his father sent back unopened. How it felt to lay next to the man he loved yet still have a huge hole in his heart because he could not share this with his father. He had tried to come home and was sent away. 'The Prodigal Sons' is a documentary that tells the story of Kimberly Reed. She graduated high school as the star quarterback and big stud and returned to her high school reunion as a woman. Her mother and her peers gladly accepted her transitioning into her more authentic self. Her brother, however, struggled to accept that he had lost a brother and was unable to celebrate gaining a sister.

These three different stories all have the same underlying theme. Whether we weren't home because we didn't know how to be ourselves, because our fathers rejected us, or because life just happened to be timed with some of our biggest identity breakthroughs, we all went through the process of coming out and coming home.

In verse 17 of this story, the prodigal son "came to himself" before returning home.

Could the wording resonate any more clearly to a queer child? The prodigal son comes home to share with his family all that he has discovered about himself. In coming home, he is revealing the truth of who he is. When a queer child comes out, we are coming home as ourselves. We are offering the truth of who we are and giving our families the opportunity to embrace us or reject us.

The prodigal son is traditionally described as humbled and ready to ask for forgiveness because he has sinned. I disagree. Yes, that walk was difficult and humbling. But being queer means that we often return home not asking for a role as a slave because we feel like we deserve it but because, when we choose to come out, we're ready to take whatever our family will give us in order to come home.

For me, my walk home started with that phone call but it took a large turn this past year when I flew home to come out to my dad. As I was traveling home, I was riddled with anxiety. I was lucky to have a father I knew wouldn't kick me out but wasn't quite sure what the celebration might look like. I was timid, humble and ready to receive whatever his response would be. Would he hug me? Would he shrug it off? Just what degree of acceptance would he give to me?

To make a long story short, I got the fatted calf. My father not only saw all of who I was, he embraced it with a love that continually challenges our family, me included, into deeper relationship with each other. But that's not everyone's story. Some are accepted back begrudgingly, like slaves. Others are thrown out. Others find the triumphant return in new homes.

Coming out is the process of dying to your old self and being born again as a new person. But coming out is not a one-time event. Being queer means dying and being reborn again and again. It means being lost and found again and again. Every day is a journey in wondering how much of ourselves to reveal to those around us.

Do I let this new friend know? Can I be out at work? Do I hold hands with someone as I walk down this street?

Though it's a core part of who we are, we daily go through either the internal or external process of denying this part of ourselves.

When the prodigal son comes home, he gets a party - he gets his pride parade. But he also faces his brother, who tries to rain on his parade. The story leaves us without a resolution. Does the brother ever come around? Or will the prodigal son have to daily suffer the trauma of rejection in his home in order to keep his relationship with his father? While my sister is nothing like this brother and everything like the father, there are always others who fill this role.

As a queer person, I have had to face the reality that to come out and accept myself means there will always be rejection. Queer and trans people constantly face others who, intentionally or not, act like the older brother.

The party thrown by the father shows us God's grace not because it's undeserved or more than our fair share. It's God's grace because it brings a temporary bright light to help us through the darkness. It is a reminder that the work of the cross promises us more than this. Like the prodigal son, we deserve this party. We deserve to celebrate. We need a time to most fully embrace ourselves and be embraced by others. Because we have walked a dark path of denial and struggle. Because, even after the party, there will be those older brothers who try to tear us down and push us back into denial.

Grace is not unmerited. Grace is necessary. Grace is hope.

Lent is difficult for many queer and trans people because we spend so much time denying ourselves or being denied by others. We face our mortality far more tangibly and frequently than people of varying privileges. We are constantly in the wilderness and it is difficult to be asked of the church to be pushed further into it. Being told to deny urges or find something about ourselves we want to change as a spiritual practice can not only be difficult, it can be harmful.

So what do we do? We focus on self-love and building self-worth until we're ready. For outsiders, it may look like we're celebrating too much or not honoring Lent. It may look like we're receiving more than our share of grace. But, just as going out into the wilderness to focus on mortality helps us find hope in the resurrection, reminding ourselves that the wilderness is not where God wants us also helps us find

hope in the resurrection.

This Lent, let the prodigal son, his father, and the experiences of queer and trans people everywhere remind you that God will bring you out of the wilderness. Let us look at the cross not merely as a death to mourn but as a promise that life will always be found in death. Whatever spiritual practice helps you find your place in the wilderness during Lent, let it also help you find hope that your true place is in the Kingdom.

Amen.