

Graceland

March 27, 2022

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Its cold today, it will warm soon. But now it is cold. One of our friends makes her home outside this church. Thom covered her with a warm blanket. As she napped outside our door.

Expect 3 snows after the forsythia blooms, right? So, I don't worry about those bushes, or the daffodils in my yard. The Magnolia, though... those delicate blooms have started to emerge. They didn't survive a late frost last year. So, I know they are vulnerable. And as I ponder this love we have for the fragile flowers and fragile friends at the door and for a child in Mariupol, Ukraine. Injured and recovering in a hospital that is also a bomb shelter. The anguish we feel for this vulnerable child we will never meet. Wipes us out, the one who loves is vulnerable, too.

And if we can ache for a budding tree and a neighbor on the step, and a child far away, what does that tell us about the one who made us? *There's a wideness in God's mercy, that is wider than the sea. There's a kindness in God's justice that is more than liberty.* Those are the words in our opening hymn from a poem written by a pastor in England in the early 1800s. One of the stanzas that didn't make it into our hymnal is this one. Would you sing it with me.

*But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.*

We equate God with guns and judgement because it's what we associate with all powerful. But love is a different kind of power. Of strength, we make limits on the love of God. Because we struggle to comprehend it. When Jesus was mingling with those whom society shunned, the pharisees grumbled because such persons were to be shamed. And so Jesus tells them a story.

Three, actually: First of a shepherd who has 99 sheep and loses one and when he finds it, calls his neighbors to rejoice.

And then of a woman who searches for a lost coin finds it, and does the same.

And then the story of a man who had 2 sons one left him took his inheritance and squandered it. The other stayed and the one who'd left. Whose life was spent out, and was finally hungry enough, weary enough to say, *I can't go on*, made his way home. He was ready to grovel, had practiced his lines, to convince. But before he could speak them was met with a force of love. To those whom Jesus told this story, this would have been unthinkable. No father would stoop so low he would have disowned that son. But this is a story about God, and about the Graceland. That God lives in and invites us to. Just like our hearts ache for the vulnerable around us just as we stoop and carry, so does God.

Christian author, Rachel Held Evans wrote these words just months before she died at age 37. *When God goes all in on us and for us there's risk and vulnerability for God, too. God planted a man right in the middle of our inhumanity our messiness, our wars of property, and nation, and ego. Jesus, who drank at weddings and cried at funerals whose heart broke and soared and skipped beat and one day, stopped. God in Christ, loves, without the guarantee of reciprocation. Divine love is freely given, mercy wider than the infinite sea, God doesn't walk away from us. We prodigals do. We walk away from the promise and dwell in other lands. Ones where is okay to bomb our neighbors, where we do not provide adequate housing, and shun the addicted, where we lock people away and keep them locked up decades after it makes any sense to do so.*

The Graceland that Jesus proclaims, that kingdom it feels like too much even for us, our hurts, our aches, our shaming sorrows, we Struggle to confess, them even to God. Who loves us, as Jesus told us. But one day, our hearts that break and soar and skip beats will one day stop, and we will have no option, but to come before the Lord. One day we will arrive, as others have this week, weary from war or illness or accident and we will be received.

Charlie Mackesy painted this image, called the Prodigal daughter for a friend. *I was just trying to show her through imagery that to be held is something she always wanted. So, I said, 'This is what God is like.' God knows you; you're known, you're fully known and loved."* This is me, this is you. This is the love

with which we will be received. This is the love by which we are enveloped, now. *This is the kingdom in which Jesus invites us to live.*

A poem by Daniel Ladinsky an American poet,
From his book: *Love Songs from God.*

God Would Kneel Down

I think God might be a little prejudiced.
For once He asked me to join Him on a walk through this world,

and we gazed into every heart on this earth,
and I noticed He lingered a bit longer
before any face that was weeping,

and before any eyes that were laughing.
And sometimes when we passed
a soul in worship God too would kneel down.

I have come to learn: God adores His creation.

Believe it, says Jesus in his story of the prodigal and the father, full of Grace.
Your hearts, formed by God. Hearts that break for tender plants and people in
the cold and children in the war. Your heart is as mine for you are mine, says
the Lord, and this is Graceland, come home. Come home, come home, ye who
are weary come home.; Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling. Calling, O children,
Come home.

Amen.