

We Often Believe We are the Problem
Luke 15:11-28
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“You is kind, you is smart, you is important.” This simple phrase is from the movie The Help and it sets the tone for the movie as we watch African American women stand up against the laws and cultural norms of the Jim Crow South. The movie reveals the struggles of women to find dignity and self-worth in the face of oppression and discrimination. Near the end of the movie these tensions come to a head as Abeline, the caretaker and helper of young Miss Mae and her mother, is forced to resign her position. As she kneels down one last time to say good-bye, Abeline tells Mae to always remember what she had taught her and one last time, as if reminding Abeline of these wise words, Mae says, “you is kind, you is smart, you is important.”

This scene speaks volumes to the human experience and the struggle to find our place in the world. We can all point to times and places in our lives when we felt rejected, shamed, demoralized or left out. We struggle to measure up to some invisible expectation we feel being demanded of us in order to fit in, but still it is not enough.

Researcher and educator Brené Brown is an expert on the subject of belonging. But she’s also emphatic on the fact that fitting in is not the same as belonging.

She puts it this way:

“In fact, fitting in is the greatest barrier to belonging. Fitting in, I’ve discovered during the past decade of research, is assessing situations and groups of people, then twisting yourself into a human pretzel in order to get them to let you hang out with them. Belonging is something else entirely—it’s showing up and letting yourself be seen and known as you really are.

Many us suffer from this split between who we are and who we present to the world in order to be accepted, But we’re not letting ourselves be known, and this kind of incongruent living is soul-sucking.”

In other words, fitting in is external. It’s an act of inauthenticity. But belonging is real. It’s internal. Furthermore, it’s a willingness to acknowledge that each of us belongs to something greater than ourselves. Belonging does not pivot on our actions or the approval of others. It’s our birthright.

I wonder if that is why we find the parable of the Prodigal Son so powerful. We can relate to his attempts to fitting in as part of our own story. We too may feel like we are missing out on something and go in search for it. We struggle to feel like we are good enough. We thought people liked us for who we were, but realized we were being used and are abandoned by them when we cannot give anymore. We feel shame as we struggle to survive, stripped naked of all dignity and exposed to the harshness of the world around us. Time and again our attempts to fit in leaves us wondering what is wrong with us. This deep sense of loss even convinces us that even God would not accept us. The best we could do is once again try to fit in by being just a mere servant.

Somewhere along the way we have picked up the idea that we are not worthy of love. We are ashamed of who we are and refuse to believe that we will ever be accepted and truly feel like we will belong anywhere. We relate to the prodigal son because we too have been prodigal – we have squandered what God has given us. Well at least that is what others have told us. We have squandered the gifts of God and are no longer worthy of God's love and acceptance.

But what I find so interesting is that is NEVER a message that the parent has spoken. In the parable nowhere does the parent express this attitude that the child must live up to some standard of righteousness. As the audience listening to this story, we feel outraged that the child has the audacity to ask for their inheritance, basically saying "I wish you were dead." We are appalled that they waste it all on parties with strangers instead of investing it for personal growth. Finally, we are aghast that they would go to care for swine and eat rotten food. The shame of it all.

This is how the world and often times the church reacts in calling us sinners. But do you see that nowhere does the father, the parent of the story responds to the child in this shaming way. The only emotion we see is joy, pure joy and celebration at the first sign of the child's return. There is no begging to be just a servant, but instead the father, the parent covers the nakedness, restores the honor, restores the relationship and breaks out in food and celebration, why? Because this is where the child belongs. There is no "fitting in" they belong. The world sees the prodigal son, the squanderer but in reality it is the father the parent in the story that is prodigal. The Parent is the one who lavishes, abundantly blesses and restores the birthright of belonging to the child. This was the original

meaning of the word prodigal, unmerited, extravagant, lavish generosity better known to us as grace and sanctification.

There is a big difference between guilt and shame. We all struggle with shame. The world is all about making us feel ashamed of who we are and telling us that we are the problem. We are not good enough. According to Dr. Brene Brown shame is “The deeply painful feeling or experience believing that we are deeply flawed and are therefore unworthy of connection, love and belonging. Shame is a focus on self. I am bad. Whereas, guilt focuses on what we did – what I did was bad.”

We all feel shame and we all deal with the impact that shame has on our relationships, connections and our how self-esteem. When we read the story of the Prodigal son we all see how shame stripped the child of all dignity and sense of self-worth. The Parent, however, never communicates that. The same is for us. The shame and guilt we feel does not come from God, but from the misguided demands of the world for us to fit in. In God though, we always belong, we are always the beloved child. It is not something any of us can earn or work for.

The celebration is God’s own rejoicing when we come to fully embrace this understanding of belonging to God and being fully ourselves as beloved children of God. It is God saying to us and we believing it that “we is kind, we is smart and we is important.”