

From Exceptionalism to Inclusion

I racked my brain to think of a story from my life that fits in with today's parable about a man and his two sons. A story that involves some combination of rejection, rebellion, running away, return, or resentment.

Perhaps I could tell the story of how I got my ears pierced without my parents' permission, knowing they wouldn't be pleased. Of course, I was 39 at the time so the story doesn't have as much impact as it would if I had been a teenager.

Perhaps I could talk about my brother who rejected my parents by refusing to attend a Mennonite college for at least one year while I dutifully attended and graduated from Goshen College. He went off to the wicked University of Illinois and married a woman who was not Mennonite. Of course, he met her while they were both in leadership in a campus Bible study and right after they were married, they went to Kenya and worked for MCC.

Neither story is very scandalous.

Then it came to me. I could tell you about the time I abandoned my mother and spent time in the company of a strange man. And...I can't even remember the details of the incident! Pretty sordid, right? Of course, the reason I don't remember the details is because I was about 4 years old at the time.

Here's the story as I remember it being told to me. My mother and I were in a department store in downtown Peoria, IL. Mom said to me, "As soon as we're finished here, we'll go find Daddy." A few moments later I disappeared. Mom looked for me – with increasing panic as time passed. She enlisted the help of other shoppers and store personnel. After a little while I walked in the front door followed by a man my mother didn't know. "Is this your little girl?" he asked. He reported that he has seen me outside the store. I looked like I knew where I was going. He followed me until I went back into the store.

I can imagine my mother hugging and kissing me, filled with relief and joy. I may have wondered what all the fuss was about. All I was doing was looking for my daddy. I don't think any of my brothers were with us, so there was no resentment from them for the love and attention lavished on their prodigal sister when she was welcomed into her mother's arms. This still doesn't quite match the story of the man and his two sons, but it's the best I can do from my life experience.

Before we review the parable from Luke, let's look at Paul's words from Corinthians.¹ We're living in a culture of extremes: extreme sports, extreme weather, extreme views expressed in extremely loud voices. We discover in scripture that this is not a new phenomenon. In his letter to the Corinthians,² Paul writes about the extreme makeover he has witnessed in his lifetime. Paul regards the crucifixion as the central event in history. Everything is changed by the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul wants his readers to see the event as a new beginning, when everything is remade, reordered, and reconstituted.

Paul states that each follower of Christ is a new creation. Therefore, we shouldn't judge anyone from a human point of view.³ By this he means judging according to outward appearance or worldly position.

Listen to verse 16 from *The Voice*. *Because of all that God has done, we now have a new perspective. We used to show regard for people based on worldly standards and interests. No longer. We used to think of Jesus the Anointed, the same way. No longer.*

¹ This sermon draws from "Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2022," *Leader: Winter 2021-2022*, MennoMedia, pp. 44-45; "Worship Resources, Lent-Easter 2019," *Leader: Winter 2018-19*, MennoMedia, p. 43; Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 157-158 and Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year C*, Abingdon Press, 2003, pp. 134-135; John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, Fortress Press, 1988, pp. 151-162; and Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family*, <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/031807.html>.

² 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

³ 2 Corinthians 5:16-17, *New Century Version*: From this time on we do not think of anyone as the world does. In the past we thought of Christ as the world thinks, but we no longer think of him in that way. If anyone belongs to Christ, there is a new creation. The old things have gone; everything is made new!

Not evaluating others from a human point of view means there is unity and equality in Jesus across ethnic, ideological, class, gender, orientation, and ability boundaries. Instead, we look to others' hearts, remembering that Jesus Christ died for them and set them right with God.

Before his conversion, Paul regarded Jesus by human standards, zealously persecuting followers of Christ as defilers of Judaism. Paul testifies that he experienced a major shift in his perception. His encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road led him to a stunning reassessment of Jesus.

Not only does Jesus initiate the reordering of all things; he also is the means through which we participate in the reordering. This is what Paul refers to with his notion of being "in Christ,"⁴ of being united with or belonging to Christ.⁵ It involves stepping into this process of new creation begun with Jesus. It involves participating in this newly created order, where the old is gone and the new has come.

But what form does this "new order" take? In the new order alienation gives way to reconciliation. *All of this is a gift from our Creator God, who has pursued us and brought us into a restored and healthy relationship with Him through Jesus the Anointed. And [God] has given us the same mission, the ministry of reconciliation, to bring others back to Him.*⁶

The essence of the new creation is the work of God in bringing all people and all of creation, back into right relationship with God. The distinguishing mark of the new creation is reconciliation – bringing together that which was separated.

Jesus talked about and modeled this ministry of reconciliation during his time on earth. One teaching moment is the story of the man and his two sons told in Luke 15. The first three verses set the context for this familiar parable. *Jesus became increasingly popular among notorious sinners—tax collectors and other social outcasts. The Pharisees and religious scholars noticed this and complained: "This man welcomes immoral people and enjoys their company over a meal!"*⁷

Jesus' behavior greatly offends the religious leaders. This is understandable. The people Jesus associates with are not simply friendly folk who have been misunderstood. Tax collectors have taken jobs with the foreign government occupying Israel and make good money collecting taxes from their own people, charging extra to keep for themselves. Sinners are persons whose offenses are so horrendous that have been thrown out of the synagogues. The fact that Jesus eats with them is clear evidence of his acceptance of them.

Jesus' acceptance of these people seems to convey a laxity about obedience to God's laws. So the religious leaders grumble about him. And Jesus responds with three stories – one about a lost sheep, one about some lost coins, and this one about a man and his two sons.

In Act One of this story, the younger son leaves home and falls on hard times.⁸ There's some disagreement among Bible scholars about how much of an insult the younger son's request for his share of the inheritance is. Some say it is a complete rejection of the family – equivalent to wishing his father were dead. Others say that asking for his inheritance isn't necessarily an act of rebellion. With the economy in precarious shape, it wasn't completely unheard of for younger sons to leave home and try to find a better life. He would have been expected to invest his share of the inheritance and use it to earn more income. He was forbidden, however, to jeopardize the capital. This must be available to care for his father in his old age.

What happens next, though, is totally unacceptable. His decline is rapid. He squanders his entire inheritance in loose living. He works for a Gentile – a Roman citizen, a pagan pig-owner – doing a job no Jew would do. He feeds pigs, animals Jews are forbidden to eat. He's so hungry he would even have eaten their food. He has lost his home, his family, his religion, and his health.

In the depths of his despair, he thinks about home and realizes that even his father's servants have it better than he does. He decides that returning home in humiliation is better than remaining in this situation. He

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:17, *New Revised Standard Version*: So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17, *The Voice*: Therefore, if anyone is united with the Anointed One, that person is a new creation. The old life is gone – and see – a new life has begun!

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:18, *The Voice*.

⁷ Luke 15:1-2, *The Voice*.

⁸ Luke 15:11-19

practices the speech he will make when he sees his father. “Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.”

In Act two of the story the younger son returns home.⁹ His father sees him, runs out to him, hugs and kisses him, and arranges a huge party in celebration of his return.

It’s difficult for us to understand how shocking the father’s actions are. In that culture, the idea of the male head of the house running for any reason is ludicrous. But instead of sitting and waiting for his son to come to him, he actively welcomes him. He’s been waiting and hoping for his son to return and when that happens a flurry of activity begins.

The father’s response is unheard of for someone who has been publicly shamed by his son. He doesn’t allow his son to complete his prepared speech. He doesn’t allow his son to call himself a servant. He restores his son to his position in the family. He plans a party to restore his son’s relationship within the community.

The older brother appears in Act three of the story.¹⁰ He also returns – not from a life of debauchery but from his work in the fields, work he’s been doing every day while his brother is gone. He finds a celebration in full swing. When he learns the reason for the party, he is angry and refuses to go in. This too is a terrible insult to his father.

But he does have a point. Ok, maybe let his brother come home if he shows remorse and makes restitution. But let him return to bread and water, not a fatted calf; to sackcloth, not a new robe; to ashes, not jewelry; to kneeling, not dancing; to groveling, not celebration.

Again, the father’s actions in response to this son are shocking. He leaves the party he is hosting. Abandoning his guests is a huge breach of etiquette. He goes out to speak with his son.

The older son doesn’t speak to his father with respect but blurts out his complaint. “I’ve stayed here many years serving you, never giving you grief. You’ve never thrown a party for me and my friends. When this son of yours who has thrown away your money on prostitutes shows up, you go all out with a feast! It’s not fair!”

The older son now sounds and acts very much like his brother. Both sons damage their relationship with their father. The older son with his self-righteousness and sense of entitlement. The younger with his selfishness and squandering of the inheritance.

In both cases the father restores relationship. In the last part of the story, he turns his older son’s attention to his own love and bounty. “There’s plenty to go around. All that is mine is yours. You’ve had the benefit of being with me all the time.” The father counters angry and divisive language with images of reconciliation and unity.

In both cases the father’s surprising actions challenge the self-identity of each son. He redefines the conditions under which “family” can happen. He demonstrates that reconciliation is more important than feeling blameless and right. Living at peace with both sons is more important to him than honor and status. The relationships as redefined by the father lead to life and joy.

This brings us back to the new order—the new creation—that Paul talks about. A new order in which alienation gives way to reconciliation. The younger son alienates himself by leaving his home and becoming a stranger in a strange land. He chooses a series of misguided, self-serving actions and, after exhausting himself, ceases to act on his own accord and falls into the graces of his father. The older brother alienates himself in his own home, remaining outside and refusing to be restored to his brother. He chooses actions that are equally misguided and self-serving as his brother’s, but they are habits of inaction and lack of initiative.

Both sons, each in their own way, misunderstand the workings of grace. The younger seeks to bargain or manipulate, while the elder cannot let go of self-righteousness and grudges. Yet both are welcomed home, regardless. Both brothers are called to abandon their selfishness and fall into the graces of the father’s abundance. The love of the father—impetuous, abundant, and renewed love—interrupts the cycles of selfishness and alienation that plague the family.

⁹ Luke 15:20-24

¹⁰ Luke 15:25-32

This story is Jesus' defense for eating with tax collectors and sinners. The father loved two sons, lost two sons, went out to both, and was generous to both. In the same way, the embrace of publicans and sinners doesn't mean a rejection of the faithful religious leaders. The reception of sinners isn't a rejection of saints. God is a "both/and" not an "either/or" God. The love of God interrupts the cycles of selfishness and alienation that plague the human family.

Since we share in God's reconciling work through Christ, it naturally follows that we are to be ministers of reconciliation, extending God's reconciling love throughout the world. The passage from 2 Corinthians and the story of the father with two sons challenge each of us to ask tough questions of ourselves.

How can I fully experience reconciliation, the love and peace God has waiting for me? What keeps me from feeling worthy of God's love? How am I rejecting God's love? What misguided and self-serving actions take me away from God? What habits of inaction and lack of initiative prevent me from moving toward God?

How can I be a messenger of reconciliation, of God's love and peace? Who am I rejecting? Who am I dishonoring? Who am I resenting? To whom am I failing to show my love? Who am I evaluating from a human point of view instead of from God's point of view?

Who gets to fully enjoy God's feast today? Who is being left out?

One of the resolutions to be presented and voted on at the Mennonite Church USA Special Assembly¹¹ in May challenges and encourages congregations to find ways to include people who might be left out of worship, fellowship, and community; who may not be able to fully enjoy God's feast.

The purpose of the Accessibility Resolution¹² is to help all members of MC USA recognize and seek to remove the barriers to belonging in architecture, communications and attitudes that prevent individuals with disabilities from participating in church life. Removing those barriers will bring wholeness to the Body of Christ as all people are fully integrated into the community of faith.

The resolution calls members of MC USA to commit to growing as communities of grace, joy, and peace without barriers so that God's healing and hope flow through all of us to the world regardless of ability.

Writers of the Accessibility Resolution¹³ point out that faith communities are exempt from the mandates in the Americans with Disabilities Act. They lag behind secular society in making facilities and activities accessible and in integrating those with disabilities into their communities. While Mennonites have taken many steps to become more accessible to people with disabilities, barriers in architecture, communication, and attitudes persist. These barriers hinder participation in the full life of the church for persons with mobility challenges and differing visual, intellectual, or hearing abilities.

Anabaptist Disabilities Network in collaboration with Mennonite Health Services will support congregations in the work of increasing accessibility through assessment tools, events, resources, and consultation. Congregations should periodically assess their own accessibility, survey their members to learn of barriers to full participation, and develop plans to increase accessibility.

I support this resolution and assume you will as well. We need to care for and integrate people with disabilities into the life and work of the church. Our meeting place is typical of many older church buildings that contain barriers for those with mobility challenges. The ramp, decision to have potlucks upstairs, remodeling of the passageway between the fellowship room and the sanctuary, new seating, moving the piano, and widening the step to the platform have improved accessibility, but there are additional things we could do. Diligent use of the microphone and projecting the hymns on the wall aid those with differing hearing and visual abilities. But again, there are other things we could do. With or without passage of this resolution in May, I encourage us to continually develop plans to increase accessibility for anyone who wishes to participate in the life of our faith community.

As we seek God's way, may we do everything we can to acknowledge and demonstrate that all people are equally part of God's kingdom. Amen.

¹¹ Delegate Resources: Special Session May 2022 | Mennonite Church USA (mennoniteusa.org)

¹² Accessibility Resolution (mennoniteusa.org)

¹³ 2022 Special Delegate Assembly: Highlight - Accessibility Resolution - YouTube