

Little Ones

We don't talk about Bruno... So begins one of the catchier tunes from the recent animated movie, *Encanto*. In case you are not up on the latest Pixar production or are not in regular conversation with an eight-year-old who is, *Encanto* tells the story of the Madrigal family. The matriarch, Abuela Alma Madrigal flees with her husband from their home while she cradles their infant triplets in her arms. Her husband is killed as they flee, leaving her frantic and destitute. In the face of her loss and despair, a miracle happens: a magical home comes to life before her eyes. In this home the Madrigal family flourishes, and each Madrigal child receives a special gift for the benefit of the community. One daughter, Luisa is extraordinarily strong, lifting buildings and livestock without out breaking a sweat, restoring them to their proper places. Isabela is exquisitely beautiful and blankets the world with colorful flowers. Bruno's gift is a mixed blessing, it seems. Bruno has visions of future events, including cracks in the magical Madrigal casita. In response to his visions, the family exiles Bruno. Abuela Alma seems to believe that not talking about Bruno will somehow keep the cracks from appearing, will somehow hold the perfect façade together.

Many families have a Bruno of their own, someone or something they do not discuss, do not name for fear of giving it or them more power. We in the church have our fair share of Brunos, too. We tiptoe around and shush discussions of a whole host of issues, stories, and painful memories in the hopes that they will go away and leave us in peace. We tell ourselves that this will hold the cracks at bay. For the next few weeks, we will spend some time talking about a few of our Brunos, mental health topics that have not always been a welcome part of

faithful conversation. Addiction, grief, depression, and anxiety have always been here, have always been a part of the fabric of the human family, and yet, too often we have led ourselves to believe that *not* talking about such things was the faithful choice. Somehow some of us have gotten the message that truly faithful people do not suffer in these ways, that if we just prayed enough or believed the right way, we would not face such struggles. And some of us have even come to think that our suffering or that of our loved ones was or is a sign that we have done something wrong, that we had made God unhappy, that our suffering—or that of someone else—was a sign of God’s displeasure. If you hear nothing else over the next few weeks, please hear this: there is no praying addiction or grief or depression or anxiety away. If you or someone you love suffers from any one or a combination of these or another mental health issue, God is not punishing you or them. Period. Julie and I are not mental health professionals, nor are we magicians. We cannot cure you or promise any miracles. Honestly, I’d be reluctant to trust anyone who does make such claims. We do promise to walk with you, to do our best not to fear the cracks, to point to the God who loves us beyond measure, the God who longs to bring every last lost one home, safely.

That is Matthew’s point in this morning’s text, I believe. Luke has Jesus tell the parable of the lost sheep along with the parables of the lost coin and the lost son. In Matthew’s gospel, this image is part of Jesus’ discussion of little ones within the kingdom he comes to usher in. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus tells the disciples that they must become humble like a child and to welcome little ones, that whoever welcomes a little one welcomes him. Little ones are not simply preschoolers in Matthew’s gospel. Little ones are those within the community who are “without power and...dependent on others.”¹ *Without power and dependent on others...*

¹ Footnote on Matthew 18:1, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*

In the spring of my sophomore year in college, one of my dearest friends attended her first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Through her I learned a bit about the Twelve Steps, the first of which (as you may know) is “admitting that [one is] powerless over alcohol—that [one’s life has] become unmanageable.”² Each new participant in AA is assigned a sponsor who offers support and accountability. When my friend joined, the expectation was that she would attend meetings daily, leaning on and into a community that would support and encourage her in the hard work of working one day at a time on maintaining her sobriety. At each meeting she would introduce herself using the same name she was given at birth, the same name uttered when she was baptized: “My name is Elizabeth, and I am an alcoholic.”³ She and the others gathered in that church basement would take turns identifying themselves as one of the little ones, naming out loud that they too were “without power and dependent on others.”

Addiction is a cruel and sneaky disease, and quite often it is interwoven with depression, anxiety, trauma, and/or grief. Addiction offers a seductive promise of feeling better, numbing pain, and providing an escape from all that is difficult or painful. For some the substance is alcohol, for others it is opioids or shopping or food or something else. The immediate good feeling is short-lived and the lasting results are painful and life-altering. And more often than not addiction brings with it a shroud of shame. Addiction has a way of convincing the one who is addicted that this relationship should be hidden, kept secret, not mentioned, not talked about. That shroud often falls over the family and loved ones of the addicted one as well, leaving them angry, afraid, and isolated. Anger and fear are understandable, healthy responses to a loved one’s suffering. No one should be left to fend for themselves, however. Not one of us can truly fend for ourselves after all. We have all been that one sheep at some point.

² <https://alcoholicsanonymous.com/step-1-of-aa/>

³ Names have been changed for the sake of confidentiality.

Professor Larry Lake wrote a few years back about the stark difference between his wife's breast cancer diagnosis and his daughter's struggle with addiction:

When my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer, we ate well. Mary Beth and I had both read the terrifying pathology report ... was followed by months of radiation. We ate very well.

Friends drove Mary Beth to her radiation sessions and sometimes to her favorite ice cream shop on the half-hour drive back from the hospital. She always ordered a chocolate malt. Extra thick.

Our family feasted for months on the lovingly prepared dishes brought by friends from work and church and the neighborhood: chicken breasts encrusted with parmesan, covered safely in tin foil; pots of thick soup with hearty bread; bubbling pans of lasagna and macaroni and cheese. There were warm home-baked rolls in tea towel-covered baskets, ham with dark baked pineapple rings, scalloped potatoes, and warm pies overflowing with the syrups of cherries or apples.

Almost a decade later, our daughter, Maggie, was admitted to a psychiatric hospital and diagnosed with bipolar disorder, following years of secret alcohol and drug abuse.

No warm casseroles.

At 19, she was arrested for drug possession, faced a judge, and was placed on a probation program. Before her hearings, we ate soup and grilled cheese in a restaurant near the courthouse, mere booths away from the lawyers, police officers, and court clerks she might later see.

No scalloped potatoes in tinfoil pans.⁴

⁴ <https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/11/families-dealing-with-mental-illness-need-support-too.html>. Thanks to my colleague Rev. Kathryn Johnston for pointing me to it.

I should say up front that I'm not sure how the Lakes shared the news of Maggie's struggles or with whom. What is clear is that they felt a dramatically different level of care from their community at different times.

I feel a bit protective of their friends, honestly. It is so hard to know how to respond when someone is battling addiction, especially because of all the weight of the baggage that comes with such struggles. For the most part, we no longer blame the cancer patient for her cancer diagnosis. We don't fear that cancer is contagious. Addiction is different for both the one who is addicted and the ones who love her. In the Matthew text, Jesus does not tell us how the one sheep gets separated from the 99. He is much more focused on finding the lost little one. In bible study on Wednesday, we wrestled with how we are called to respond when someone is struggling. We want to be helpful, but we are often paralyzed by our overwhelming sense of helplessness. And then one of you told the story of texting a neighbor you hadn't seen in a while to say, "I've missed you." I think that may be one of the holiest sentences we can utter. "I've missed you."

It is almost absurd to imagine that a shepherd can notice when he has 100 sheep versus when he has 99. It takes a special sort of vision to see that one is missing, and yet it is that kind of vision Jesus wants his community to have. As another one of you pointed out on Wednesday, we have almost all been that one at some point. Can you imagine how that one little one must feel when she knows that she has been missed? All the warm casseroles and all the scalloped potatoes in the world cannot heal addiction or the painful havoc addiction wreaks, but even one casserole, one pan of scalloped potatoes, one phone call, one note, one wave, one smile, one hug can let someone know that their pain has been seen, that they are missed, that they are not left to fend for themselves.

At the risk of spoiling the plot of *Encanto*, neither hiding Bruno nor hiding from him and his visions prevents the cracks from coming to the Madrigal's beloved casita. The cracks come. Blame, fear, shame, and anger abound, and the family is faced with the reality that they are powerless to hold the perfect façade together. And then, as the family grieves in the ruins of their lost home, the community that has blossomed just beyond their door shows up to help them rebuild their life.

That sounds a bit like a twist on Jesus' image, almost as if the 99 join the shepherd in his looking for the one. That sounds almost absurd, I know. But then I stumbled across a video clip of a lamb and a small child, little ones in every way. The lamb is anxious because he has been separated from his mother. He walks toward the child baa-ing pitifully, and the child points the lamb toward his mother, who is at that moment coming toward the bleating baby from yards away. One little one helps another little one find his way, even as one of the flock is looking for him.⁵

Addiction is a treacherous, sneaky disease that lures too many, too easily. It is relentless, among the most stubborn of cracks in the human family. It insists on separating too many little ones from the flock. And yet, we cannot give up on the lost one. We cannot let cracks in the walls the final say. We are a people built on Jesus Christ, the firmest of foundations. He is our gracious Good Shepherd. We are all his little ones, and he insists on bringing every last little one home. He does not give up on us; he is forever seeking, loving, finding, and saving, more relentlessly and more stubbornly than the worst addiction.

⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CegJtKjIWeA/>

May we who find ourselves in the 99 follow his lead and do our faithful best to seek out the lost little ones, too, and shape a space and a community where it is ok to flounder, ok to admit we cannot do it—whatever it is—on our own.

May we who find ourselves lost, addicted, frightened, or alone know that we are missed, that we are loved, and that both heaven and earth are eager to celebrate our being found and restored to the flock.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.