

Words on a Sign

I won't ask for a show of hands, but as I read the story from Luke's gospel, I wonder how many of you relate more easily to the older brother. As I think you know, I am an older sister to a younger brother, so at least at some point I have very much related to the older brother in the story. As a child, I had my running list of things that were not fair. My younger brother got to see his first PG movie the same day I did. He got to spend the night out at an earlier age than I did. And, of course, when I headed off to college, he got to be a doted upon only child. Sure I did, too. But I was an only from birth to 26 months. He was an only from 16 to 18, and maybe a bit more able to appreciate all that comes with being an only child of almost-empty nesters. In addition to a kitchen regularly stocked with all of his favorite snacks, he also managed to get a cat out of the deal.

I'm not sure our sympathizing with the older brother is entirely dependent on our birth order, however. We have been taught to understand that the father in the story is a stand in for God. For those of us who have been faithful, rule-abiding church people who attend worship more Sundays than not, who serve on committees, clean the kitchen, and weed the grounds, who teach and give and show up without fail, we, too can easily begin to feel a bit grumpy at the thought of God loving those other people as much as God loves us. We, too can find ourselves insisting:

Listen! For all these years I have been working my fingers to the bone for you. I have played by the rules and kept my nose clean and done every single thing you have asked of me. But you have never thrown a party for me, nothing like you're throwing for him anyway. Do I even matter to you? Am I an afterthought in this household? Do I even belong here, with you?¹

This parable is preceded by the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep, so it seems Jesus is concerned to emphasize that even when one is missing, God is determined to look, to seek, to find. And God is determined to

¹ Luke 15:29, paraphrased

celebrate when the lost one is found. The text uses the word celebrate four times in the span of just a few verses. God wants to celebrate, and God wants everyone at the party, older and younger siblings alike.

But it is hard to be sympathetic to that younger brother, right? After all, he rudely asks his father for his share of his inheritance, to cash out and get away as soon as he can. He does not invest prudently or even plunge his money into a brilliant if risky Kickstarter plan to innovate pig farming. No, he takes what he is given and blows it recklessly, completely disregarding all that he has been taught, all that is good and wise and faithful. He finds himself barely existing in a foreign land where unlike his kind and generous father, “no one gave him anything.”² We are told that he “comes to himself,” which sounds like a wakeup call as well as an epiphany. He begins to rehearse what he will say to cajole his way back in, to at least get the same food the servants get: “I have sinned against heaven and before you.” At least one scholar insists that the younger son does not repent or that his repentance is less than genuine.³ She makes the case that sheep and coins cannot repent and yet their return is celebrated. She wants to claim the same thing with the sons. Yes, *sons*. Because at least at one point along the way, neither son feels he belongs.

I realize that it may sound a bit tone deaf to preach about Sabbath in the midst of a world that is in tatters, a world just keeps finding new ways to break God’s heart and ours. But the more I listened to these texts over the past few weeks, I realized just how urgently I need the reminders about sabbath, about who I am, and about who we are as people learning again to practice sabbath. And I am now convinced that the larger battered world needs a community that practices sabbath faithfully. Sabbath is not a call to hide from the world, but rather an essential practice that enables us to faithfully engage the world that God so dearly loves, the very world that Christ comes to save. The text from Deuteronomy speaks explicitly about the call to practice a sabbath or sabbatical year every seven years. This sabbath-keeping urges the community to forgive or release debts and begin anew every seven years. They are called to weave sabbath not just into their weekly calendar but into a larger community rhythm, too. And then we read about this wasteful, extravagantly, maybe even foolishly forgiving father, and we realize that we have been forgiven in abundance as well. But if we never

² Luke 15:16

³ Amy-Jill Levine, *The Jewish Annotated NRSV*, Second Edition (Oxford UP: New York, 2017), 146.

pause, if we never turn off the noise of the larger world and listen, if we never find a way to stop, abide, and rest in that love, it can be hard for that love to sink deep in within us, and we will miss how that love can work on us and in us and through us.

A beloved seminary professor, Sib Towner loved to describe the father in the most vivid of terms. He would insist that we imagine this wealthy landowning father in his full-length robes, a power and presence in the community who would be expected to behave in a certain way. Sib then invited us to picture this same man's hiking up his robes and running in the most undignified way at full-speed toward his slovenly, likely smelly, surely exhausted, and just barely repentant son. I like to imagine his hiking up his robe and tracking down the older brother, too. The father's concern is not for his own dignity or reputation; no, his concern, his passion is for his children to be home with him. His deepest longing is that they know they belong.

Like you, I have been heartsick by the recent shootings in Buffalo, Uvalde, and Highland Park. Each time another shooting happens—and sadly I'm afraid there will be more—we wonder aloud as a society about why, about what could lead these young men to do such monstrous things. A study came out a while back looking at the young men who have been the shooters in recent years, and at least some evidence points to alienation, to a belief that they do not belong. The media is quick to label them monsters and honestly, I probably have, too, but I am beginning to wonder what—if anything—the church can offer to young men who are longing for a place to belong, who are finding their home in a culture that tells them this kind of violence is not only ok, but something to be celebrated. Because these young men are not monsters. The acts they commit are monstrous, but they were babies once. They lost first teeth and took first steps, and somewhere along the way something went terribly wrong, and someone let them down. They lost their way. They lost any sense of love and belonging—if they ever had it to begin with.

I attended a workshop about four years ago where the leader told us about Angela King and Toney McAleer, the founders of Life After Hate. One article describes their group in this way:

It begins with compassion. Founded by former extremists, we are committed to helping people leave the violent far-right. We are dedicated to inspiring all people to a place of compassion and forgiveness — for themselves and each other.⁴

King and McAleer's work takes them around the country to be on the front lines of hate speech and hate groups. At a rally in Boston in the spring of 2017, "They didn't join the shouting. [They held up a sign.] Their sign spoke for them: 'There is life after hate.'"⁵ They speak from experience. They both know that former life well:

'[With this group,] I felt power where I felt powerless. I felt a sense of belonging where I felt invisible,' [Tony] 49, said of the pull of the white nationalism that lured him to spend 15 years as a skinhead recruiter and an organizer for the White Aryan Resistance.⁶

Dr. Ervin Staub studies this phenomenon for a living:

'Why would people join groups like that? It usually involves [their] finding no other socially acceptable and meaningful ways to fulfill important needs — the need for identity; the need for a feeling of effectiveness; the need for a feeling of connection... If you don't feel you have much influence and power in the world, you get a sense of power from being part of a community.'⁷

The need for community, the need for identity, the need for connection... does any of this ring any bells? I do not claim to know have all the answers, and I recognize that the issues of gun violence, hate groups, and mass shootings are incredibly complex to say the least, so there is much I do not know. However, I *do* know what it is to have found my identity within a community. By the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit I have found my identity in and with a covenant people. These people have promised to love God and to love me and to serve one another in God's name working for peace and justice and mercy and redemption. The young people who have been swept up in hate groups are hungry for a community, for a place to belong, and they have found it. Couldn't we offer them another way? Whether we are older sisters or younger brothers or something else

⁴ <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/>

⁵ <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-08-23/what-makes-people-join-hate-groups-studies-say-childhood-torment-social-isolation>

⁶ <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-08-23/what-makes-people-join-hate-groups-studies-say-childhood-torment-social-isolation>

⁷ <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-08-23/what-makes-people-join-hate-groups-studies-say-childhood-torment-social-isolation>

entirely, we find our identity in Jesus Christ, the one who shows us God's run-down-the-road-robe-hiked-up-undignified love for us and tells us we belong. In him, we know there is life after not only hate but also after failure, trauma, addiction, disappointment, loss, and despair. In him we find that we belong.

We are reminded at each and every baptism that the promise—this unearned, undeserved promise of grace and new life is for us and “for ALL who are far away.”⁸ It is hard to get much farther away than to be drowning in hate or depression or addiction or debt or anger or resentment or fear, and yet we are a people who know that there is life after all of these things, or at least we are supposed to. And on my best days I do. On those days when I struggle to remember, when I am quick to point a finger in outrage or fold my arms in resentment, it is the full stop of sabbath—this “merciful intrusion”—that brings me around and reorients me.⁹

Sabbath is a corrective to my stubborn insistence on hanging out in pig slop or gritting my teeth as I slave away in the fields when a celebratory feast awaits me at home. It is in worship and silence and rest and hearing God's good Word to me that I am able to realize again at my core whose I am and all that I have been given. Only in my stopping, in my resting, in my worshiping, in my shutting up and slowing down, am I able to hear the pounding footsteps of my beloved parent racing down the road toward me to celebrate my coming home. This parent comes toward me with arms stretched wide no matter where I have wandered, no matter what I have squandered, before I can even put together an eloquent confession.

Friends, we are lost coins and lost sheep and lost children who have been found. It is this good news that the church can offer to this heartbroken and heartbreaking world. We do not get everything right 100% of the time, nor do we hold all the answers, but we can throw open our doors and hold up a sign that declares that there is life after hate, life after despair, life after failure, life after loss, not simply in the sweet by and by, but here and now. As those who wear Christ's name, as those who know what it is to abide and rest in his love, we have a message to shout to the rooftops and write in the biggest sharpie on the biggest sign. This news is too good to keep to ourselves.

⁸ Acts 2:39, NRSV, emphasis added

⁹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1146

The larger church is known for a lot of things right now, and not all of them are good to be honest. What if we were known for sabbath and welcome and hope instead? We are Christ's beloved ones, always, no matter what, as are they—no matter who they are, no matter what they have done. "There is life after," the sign says. Those words are so much more than words on a sign. Those words are a reminder, a promise for them and for us. And when we pause and breathe and pray and listen, when we allow those words to sink deep into our being, we remember whose we are and we are able to see more clearly who and whose they are, too. This pausing, this resting enables us and compels us to do the holy work of welcoming the lost, the angry, the weary, the worn-down, the failures, and the faltering in the name of the God who runs not from us, but headlong toward us in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God has thrown open the door to a home where we belong, a place where we can rest. This same God calls us to open those doors to them in his name, as well—no matter who they are, no matter what they have done, no matter how far away they may be—a home with him and with us, where they can belong and rest, too.

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