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## *You're Not Your Season*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Luke 15:11-32 (Psalm 139)

I worked last summer as a chaplain in a psychiatric hospital. The unit in which I served housed patients with mental health struggles which had spiraled into violence, resulting in legal complications. This unit was, in many ways, a holding place: patients spent their days waiting for evaluations, stabilization, medication, and judgment.

While there, I once described it as:

Alternating sporadically between quiet sleepiness and heightened contagious aggression, often resulting in altercations popping up throughout the halls. At any moment, patients could be amicably chatting, only to spin out into racial slurs, flying fists, and violent misunderstanding. Yet, in the midst of all this, there were pockets of peace: a handful of patients who never seem to get sucked into the disruptions. Patients pace, sleep, worry, and fight. Peace was an illusion, thinly veiling the underlying angst and hopelessness.

Often my role as chaplain was to listen, but the patients also loved it when I read. They would gather in chairs when I would begin — many would close their eyes, some would hum, the pacers would shorten their trek, limiting it the space where they could hear my voice.

A favorite passage for this group was Psalm 139.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways. (1-3)

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,"  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you. (7-11)

The promise that there was nowhere they could be that God was not bewildered them as they sat in plastic chairs, behind guarded doors, in a place that so often felt like Sheol (like hell itself). How could God be there? And why?

So often in pastoral care visits, the most prevalent spiritual distress circled around the fear that they had fallen too far, that God could not love them, forgive them, care for them. That they deserved abandonment and isolation from hope; mercy an unreachable, unfathomable promise. They self-abandoned to the hell of fear they had built — the walls seemingly insurmountable, even by God Godself.

And yet, this Psalm stands in direct opposition to that narrative, God cast as the one who is dismantling these prisons as fast as they, as *we* can build them.

It is through this frame I read the parable of the prodigal child.

Now before I begin, I would like to challenge you to let go of what you already know of this story — it is a well-loved, well-know parable recounted and reexamined by countless books, articles, and artist depictions.

But Jesus' parables are as living documents, stories told as though a kaleidoscope — offering the invitation to turn and to turn and to turn them — they come with a challenge to always learn something new, to always hear something fresh. So, for today, let loose the assumptions you hold. Shake off the temptation to fill in what you know. Listen with ears afresh, with hearts open. What could the Spirit whisper to you today, if you willingly hear?

Luke 15:11-32

This parable was told by Jesus to a large crowd that had been following him. He had been traveling and teaching and healing and had amassed quite a discipleship. Often, when this human mass accrued, Jesus would tell challenging parables — teachings that shifted the prevalent spiritual and cultural thinking of the time. In this instance, he noticed that the spiritual leaders who had joined the crowd, were grumbling about Jesus welcoming and eating with

‘undesirables’. So, he responded by telling a series of parables about lost things being found and then received with seeming disproportionate rejoicing— a sheep, a coin (Luke 15: 1-10), a son.

But this story offers so much more than what can be found on its surface.

I remember, years before I was a student at Princeton Seminary, I heard a professor speak on parables. He challenged the way we often cast the characters found in Jesus’ stories as though they are obvious: this is me, this is my sibling, this is God...

Jesus was a master storyteller, the author of the Kingdom turned upside down where the last are first, and the first are last (Matthew 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30). He’s rarely obvious, often challenging, perplexing even those closest to him.

So, what happens to this story if we let go of our assumptions? If we allow ourselves to believe that Jesus was saying more than what we so often presume?

What if these characters are not individuals but *seasons* of life? Challenges we face throughout our existence? What if, at different stages, we become each of these personas?

And what could that tell us about God?

Let’s start with the younger child. The prodigal.

Have we been this person? Have we thumbed our noses at what we have, at what was expected of us? Have we rebelled?

Have we walled ourselves into a darkness we created? Have we sat with the pigs? Have we destroyed ourselves with guilt?

What does it take in that most broken of moments to crawl back and beg forgiveness? And as that forgiveness is given, abundant and shocking. When we have crafted a plea for the very least, and received the very most. When we are embraced, never to waste away in purgatorial servitude, but to live as a fully redeemed heir? Loved. Accepted. Celebrated.

Have you been this child? Have you felt this overwhelming grace — difficult to process, impossible to truly comprehend?

Are you this child, now? Do you find yourself shuffling down the long path home, kicking rocks as you rehearse your self-deprecating speech? Are you still fearful to ask forgiveness?

Or

Are we the older child?

What of this one who has stayed? The one who has done everything right. Who has worked themselves to the bone, trying to achieve enough, to be good enough, to earn the love that was theirs all along? To earn the grace that was freely given? To be late to the party, demanding our dues, even as we are freely invited into the fullness the mercy celebration?

Can we admit that we have been this person? That this older sibling is not just the other, but the soured face that sometimes stares back through our mirror?

Are you this child now? Resenting those who aren't as tired as you? Pointing to legalism, to Biblical literalism, to whatever 'ism' proves that you are better than those who simply skate by on mercy?

Even now, do you bristle, angry to be seen in this way?

Or

Are we the parent?

*Now, there's a general acceptance, or even an assumption that this father is simply the God figure in the parable. But I invite you to turn that kaleidoscope: what if, instead this character could represent another season of life?*

Have we been this parent figure? Have we been wronged? Have we been hurt?

Have we had to forgive someone we aren't sure really means it? Someone who has done nothing to earn it? Are we challenged to love them without holding back?

And if we can actually muster that kind of grace, are we then met with the resentment of those who think we should do more, be more, demand more accountability. Have we been rejected because we haven't rejected another? Have we faced a demand to choose between mercy and acceptance?

Is this the season in which you find yourself? Have you been accused of naiveté? Of allowing others to know mercy undeserved? Are you now looking into the eyes of one who society, even the religious push you to reject because they say they are beyond hope? And yet, you hope.

And if these characters are but seasons in our lives. If we are each of them in different moments.

Where then do we find God?

I find God in the magnetic pull between these characters. I see God in the mercy shared. In the love abundant. And I also see God filling the void created by human stubbornness.

When the younger child rejects their parent, and goes into the world, God goes too.

When the younger child is sitting in the filth of their self-created personal hell, God is there.

When the younger child treads the long road home, God's mercy fills that road connecting the parent to the child, pulling them back in love.

When the older child rejects the unconditional forgiveness given to their sibling, God is in the parent's voice, pulling at their heartstrings, working to knit them back together.

When the older child stands outside the party, God moves the parent in their refusal to leave this elder child in the darkness with that anger.

God's mercy fills that distance to connect these persons, chipping away at stubborn self-righteousness, and pulling them back in love.

And as the parent navigates the heartache of rejection, of judgment, of the breaking apart of that which they are expected to hold together — God is there. A balm on their heart. A hope in the loneliness of the in-between time, when nothing seems to be coming together.

God's mercy fills that void. Connecting that which seems shattered, and pulling it back in love.

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Dear ones, you are not a caricature. And you are not the season in which you find yourself.

You are a beloved child of God.

No matter where you find yourself aligning today, it is but for a moment.

No matter where you find yourself aligning today, God is a very real presence therein.

Life is hard, but God is faithful.

And even in the depths, you will not ever be separate from the One who knit you together. The

One for whom even darkness is not dark. The One who brings light because They are the light

(John 8:12).

Amen and amen.