

LOVE & HOPE – THE DIFFERENCE

Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

The climate crisis... How does it affect you? Do you think about it much? Does it sometimes keep you up at night? Or, do you, like many, just keep it away from your mind hoping it will just go away. Maybe scientists and activists are making too much of a fuss about it. Maybe it's all a conspiracy of sorts intended to stir up panic and worry in us for political reasons. The climate is changing one way or another. How can we change the needle on that realistically? Why worry about what is too big for any one of us to solve? Let's just live today.

Well, wherever we may be personally in relation to our climate crisis, there is growing phenomena among young people of distress about the future where the climate is concerned. And it's manifesting in all kinds of ways. From anxiety to despair, from anger to hopelessness, from protest to a nihilism about the possibility of any change, from constructive efforts in education and action to depression when there are no signs of positive change in the larger scheme of things... the reality is: younger generations are experiencing the crisis in all kinds of deeply emotional ways. One conviction among many is that bringing any children into the world right now is selfish given where things are headed. There's no healthy future for children going forward realistically. And without a future, how can we hope?

In a recent book, once pastor, professor, and now social thinker: Brian McLaren writes about how we are to find hope in a world with a climate crisis before us. His book is entitled: *Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart*. In the beginning of the book, McLaren warns readers that the content is honest and will not sugar-coat the reality of what's coming. He looks at four possible outcomes, and even the best case scenario is severe. But one of the things he also does in the book is dig deep into how we can live positively even in the face of a worsening crisis. And one of those things has to do with an important distinction not only he, but others also make – the distinction between hope and love.

This is an important distinction and a critical distinction, I believe, for our times. Whether we are fearful about the future and grieve in anticipation of loss to come, or whether, on this Communion of Saints Sunday, we also grieve what we have lost of people in our past; what may the distinction between love and hope teach us about how to live our lives well today?

To guide us, let's dive into our scripture reading this morning in search of revelatory wisdom. Jesus tells a story and he tells it for a particular reason. In the opening verses were told that religious authorities were upset with Jesus because he was so willing and ready to embrace "tax collectors and sinners." Who are we talking about here? Tax collectors did work for Rome which ruled the Jewish people with an iron fist. Taxes were collected to keep the military infrastructure well-funded and it was this very infrastructure that kept the people subjugated

with brutal enforcement. To make it easier for Rome, regular Jewish citizens called “tax collectors” would go around collecting these taxes for Rome and taking a cut on top to line their own pockets. In other words, tax collectors made money off the suffering and oppression of their own people. No wonder they were so hated.

And what about “sinners”? They could be anyone who didn’t live according to the religious rules established by the authorities. Everyone was guilty unless they received a pass from those who controlled the standards of what was required. If they declared you a sinner, you were a sinner. If they declared you righteous, you were righteous. And to be righteous, you also had to follow their rules and submit to their authority.

So then, people declared sinners are rejected, condemned and made to feel guilty and ashamed. But Jesus as messiah of God’s love and justice has compassion for them and declares to them that God does not condemn them, but believes in them. On the other hand, Jesus also reaches out to tax collectors who are participating in a system that is highly sinful in order to make a profit. Jesus doesn’t condone what they do, but he also confronts them with the mercy of God seeking to reach their hearts to open them to change. One way or the other, Jesus is engaging people with radical love and all of it is offensive to the authorities in one way or the other, because they prefer judgement and condemnation to love. They believe you can only change people by threatening them, judging them or shaming them into it. They don’t believe love can really change anyone. All love does is give people a free pass. What do you think? It’s not straightforward is it?

And this is why the story Jesus tells is so radical! There’s a father who has two sons. Let’s imagine the father represents God and God’s love as Jesus embodies and teaches it. But who, then, are the two sons? One son is a lost son representing tax collectors and sinners. The other son represents the authorities who carry a lot of anger, hate, bitterness and judgement. Broadly speaking we know whose side we should be on: the side of mercy and compassion. But is this true in every situation and every relationship? Are there not times and relations where we can feel resentful, judgemental even bitter and feel justified in not wanting to give any more chances? Are there people we believe will never and perhaps can never change? Are we to simply allow ourselves to be walked all over and taken advantage of again and again because we are too readily compassionate? These are important questions without easy answers.

Well, what happens in the story? Both sons work on their father’s farm and both of them will inherit it when their father is no longer around. But the younger son doesn’t want to work on the farm any longer. He wants to go out, explore and enjoy the world and he wants his father to mortgage the farm and give him his half of the inheritance early. Wow! Isn’t this selfish? Isn’t this terribly disrespectful? Sure he wants to go off and do his thing, but to put the whole operation into such jeopardy by having it mortgaged? Anyhow, surprisingly and totally

untypically, the father agrees and gives the younger son his share of the inheritance whatever risk the father incurs by such generosity.

So what happens? The younger son goes off and lives his dream. But after a while, he's used up all his money with wild living and bad investments, and his dream becomes a nightmare as he has nothing to show for it in the end. He's got no money left, and all his so-called friends who used him while he had money now abandon him. He's desperate, homeless and destitute. His humiliation is especially emphasized as he gets a job feeding pigs, which for a Jew would be extra shameful. He is so hungry he envies the pigs' food. How bad can things get for people? How bad have things got for any of us at times?

Anyhow, at one point he comes to and thinks about the hired hands on the farm back home. They're treated way better than he's faring, with plenty to eat and treatment with dignity. He's already in the gutter as far as his self-respect goes. Why not go back on his knees and beg his father to take him back. Only, he wouldn't be asking for anything of what he had. He could work as a hired hand because at least he would get decent food and shelter that way.

OK, but what happens? The most poignant part of the story comes when the son makes his way back. We're told that even while at a distance his father looks out and recognizes him. And instead of waiting for his son to come right to the front door to explain himself and on his knees seeking for mercy, and ready for whatever punishment would be meted out, the father runs to him and hugs him with tears and kisses him all over. And even as the son goes down on his knees, begs for forgiveness and asks only to be taken in as a hired hand, his father raises him up, calls the servants to bring him proper clothing and prepare for a feast to welcome back a son to full restoration. Wow! How does this make any sense? I guess it depends where you've been and where you are in your life experiences no? Have you ever made any big mistakes requiring mercy rather than judgement? Or have you ever been burned by someone taking advantage of your mercy and grace to use and abuse your generosity and forgiveness?

Anyhow, the son is fully restored and everyone is celebrating... everyone except the older son. Why? We know why. His brother has used up all the money with nothing to show for it. How can we celebrate his return empty-handed? But beyond the obvious reasons, we also get a glimpse into the older son's heart. He is full of bitterness, hate, contempt and misery. He has no warmth, generosity or love in him, for his brother, for his father, for the farm or his life. Everything it seems is calculated on a scale of reward and punishment in material terms. His brother is as good as dead to him. He took the money and now what's left?

His father tells him: whatever is left, it's all yours. Well, he tells his father, why have you not celebrated me and thrown a party for me? Well, his father responds, you and I are together, here, but this brother of yours totally lost his way. We have to celebrate because he was as

good as dead and is now alive, he was lost and is now found. Please come in and celebrate with us!

OK, but what do you think? And how does this story have any relevance to our theme, namely, the difference between hope and love?

We love now regardless of how much or how little we may hope for the future or for some outcome. We love now... If all we're living for is some future outcome we're hoping to achieve, how are we living fully in our present moment enjoying and loving now? Does loving and enjoying now change depending on what the outcome is tomorrow? Do we stop loving now because we are still grieving our past which has robbed us of the will and heart to love and enjoy? Or, do we honour the earth and those we have loved and lost even more so by loving in tangible and earthy ways here and now?

Whether the younger son learned his lesson fully from his mistakes and would truly change in the future, the invitation today is to love him hoping such love will heal the brokenness and shame in him. But if we are full of fear for the future or a grief that has left us bitter or hardened because of loss, how can we fully love today and enjoy the fullness such love can bring?

To love today is no guarantee things will improve or change tomorrow. We keep working for change and doing our part. But we cannot guarantee things will change adequately or that some hard times may not also be ahead. The biggest danger is the hardening of our hearts, the distancing from our feelings, our caring, our engaging and our working because we love this earth and we love the life and the people in it today. This is the message of the gospel. Is it a message we also need to hear and absorb? I believe it is, more than ever. Our hope has to arise out of love, and our hope is in a future not tied to any particular outcome. Yes we hope global warming will slow down enough for us to better adapt to it, and yes we hope our collective efforts as humans will make that difference. But we don't know if that will happen for all our efforts. It doesn't mean we don't try where we can and however we can and with a lot of love in our hearts rather than judgement, bitterness and hopelessness.

And it's this same love we need to live today to honour those who are no longer with us in the flesh whom we have loved and lost and feel their absence deeply. The people, the relationships, the times of abundance, health, youth and whatever else we grieve in some way we have lost... How can we open our hearts to love today and find fullness in such loving?

Jesus, God, the father in our story, offers such love to us as an energy ready to break through, touch and transform our hearts ever more deeply. Whether we are lost and in need of welcome and redemption, or whether we are bitter, angry, sad, hopeless, anxious or aloof, may love find us and get through to us so that we can serve as the hands, feet, voice and heart of

Christ for our world today. The world needs all the love it can get to break through the hardness and hopelessness... Will you renew your commitment as a disciple of Jesus and say "yes"? Amen.