



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
March 31st, 2019
Youth Sunday
Sermon: "Be the Change"
Paige Kemper, Emma Maney, Kaegan Parks
Psalm 32
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Emma: The prodigal son story? Really? We are preaching for a worship service about change, did we really *have* to preach on a text that everyone knows?

Kaegan: Yeah! I've heard this story quite a bit. What else can even be said about it?

Paige: You're right! This is a familiar parable. But what if we focus on the *people* instead, since the Bible is about people? Let's look at the father, the brother, and the prodigal son.

Emma: Great, another story about men.

Kaegan: Yeah and we are 3 women! This story goes way beyond gender. It's about our human experience.

Paige: It's about God's love and grace, about faith and forgiveness.

Emma: Just like Jesus welcomed in sinners and spoke truth to power, God calls us to be ready to "be the change" in the world.

Kaegan: I think today we should open ourselves up to hearing this story again.

Paige: Let's put ourselves in their shoes, and see what we can learn.

Emma: Where should we start?

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Paige:

It is easy to see the prodigal son as a lost individual who made bad decisions, but we can empathize with him as a person who hoped to see the world and realized along the way that his life was not going in the direction he wanted. Changing the way you live and see yourself is hard.

Growing up I enjoyed going to school, however I also felt misplaced in the classroom because what was taught didn't captivate my attention. So, while I focused in school, I

devoted much of my attention and curiosity to the thing that compelled me: Ballet. For 13 years, I pursued ballet with a passion, intensity, and great joy. I had the goal of becoming a professional ballet dancer, and dedicated much of my time to this art I valued deeply, because it was core to my identity.

Then, in 10th grade, my eyes for the first time were opened to other options. I started taking my first AP classes, in World and Art History, because I wanted to challenge myself in new ways academically. Now I should mention that history was definitely not my favorite subject when I was 15, however through these classes I discovered something I hadn't previously known: history is interesting! And this made me wonder; if history is interesting, what else is out there?

And this led me to a bigger realization of my own; as I learned more, my curiosity and excitement to learn would grow even more, and I recognized that while I had a deep passion for ballet, I was beginning to want a different future for myself than I had planned.

And, even though I knew in my core that letting ballet go was something I needed to do to then enable myself to fully embrace learning and growing in other ways, it was an incredibly difficult decision.

I struggled to know myself because who I was and who I wanted to become were not the same. I wrestled with finding the line between letting people down and supporting myself and what I needed, and I will be the first to admit that navigating this was scary, uncomfortable, and imperfect.

And, through making this decision, I was able to come to terms with myself, better understand where I wanted to go, and then become the change that I wanted. Two years later, I do still miss dancing, however I miss it with a fondness and not regret. I am proud of myself for having made that difficult decision, and I now have more clarity about my future and about myself.

I empathize with the Prodigal Son. He found a way to be the change by first coming to terms with his reality and understanding the things he wanted to change for himself, and then setting out to make those changes, embracing his fear and shame, and coming home.

- In this scripture, first he recognized that he had gone astray, and that his life was not what he wanted it to be; he was alone, living in poverty and hunger as a result of his earlier choices.
- Then, the son said in this scripture that "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" and then he set off and went to his father.

“Being the change” requires us to first understand ourselves; The prodigal son had come to this conclusion before he sought to go home, realizing that he was not living the life that he wanted at his core.

Then, “being the change” requires us to do something about it; the prodigal son then, immediately, set out to get where he wanted to go, embracing his fear and vulnerability through hope and faith.

We are called to understand ourselves, where our vision is limited, and where our lives have drifted, and to embrace these mistakes by taking another step forward while knowing that there is a long path ahead.

- In addition to this, the scripture includes the nuanced detail that “while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”

No matter where we are on our faith path, God in all of his grace accepts us. The son endured fear, but moved forward. The son felt shame, but was greeted with grace. The son was lost, but found he was home.

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Emma: It took a lot of courage for you to let go of a dream and embrace a new path for your life.

Kaegan: Yeah, and just like the prodigal son, you remind us that it is okay for us to be vulnerable. We have to be honest about how we feel.

Paige: Thank you, and I agree. When we are open and let ourselves be vulnerable, God’s Spirit will find us.

Emma: but friends, it isn’t always easy to be *that* open, and *that* vulnerable. When God calls us out into the world to “be the change” – it can be hard or even feel impossible.

Kaegan: Why is change so hard??

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Emma:

When I read the Prodigal Son story, the older brother is not a character I think about. He is not someone I thought I would want to spend a lot of time with. But, in exploring this text, the older brother seems to exemplify how hard change can be for us, as well how difficult it is to “be the change” God calls us to be.

This parable does not center around the elder brother. It is about welcoming the child who “*was dead and has come to life; who was lost and has been found.*” The older brother was not ready to welcome his brother home. *Why should he?*

For years, *he* was the one who had stayed home, worked with his father, and never asked to be rewarded. But he got called out on his reluctance to change. The father expressed that everything that belongs to him, also belongs to the eldest son, but *right now* it is time to celebrate the younger brother's return.

As a majority white congregation, we need to know when it is time for us to take a step back and center the voices of others who need to be heard.

We can think about this story in many different ways. Imagine the younger brother is gay and coming out to his family for the first time. The father loves, accepts, and celebrates him for who he is. But, the older brother is reluctant to love and support his brother.

Not only has he has been caught in a way of thinking about what a romantic relationship *should* be, but he also has thought about himself in one way. Opening up that boundary might feel threatening to him.

Maybe he is afraid to change. If he doesn't change his mind, he will not be able to see, to understand who his brother is, or appreciate his brother's story. And maybe, he won't be free to see himself truthfully.

We are all the older brother at times. We get very comfortable in our own lives with the communities we are a part of, but this often leads to us being unwilling to honor the experience of those who are different than us.

In doing that, we don't get to know what someone else's story is or who they are. We miss out on growing as a person, by learning about something new or different.

Over the past week and a half, I have been making a decision to either take the typical high-school graduate path of going to college, or taking a year off from "real" school, and move to Tucson, Arizona to join the Young Adult Volunteer program.

The thought of stepping into a completely unknown experience made me very nervous. But, I finally decided that going to Tucson is what God is calling me to do. In Tucson, I will be interning with places that support and work with immigrants and immigrant families.

This is completely new to me and way out of my comfort zone. I have not listened and learned first-hand the experience of these children of God...yet. But, I am ready to embrace this change and use my light to follow a new path for myself. This feels essential to me as someone who wants to support, listen to, love, and accept everyone.

The older brother reminds us that even though we think we do everything correctly, we are never too perfect to be "called out." As people of faith, we are meant to allow God to call ourselves out of our privilege and comfort, and be changed. It is never too late for God to open our hearts, call us out, and to allow us to see beyond what we know and have experienced.

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Kaegan: Wow, you really broke that down for me.

Paige: God believes in us. We *can* be the change. And what is possible when we are the change?

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Kaegan:

Being called to be the change is learning to open ourselves up to the difficult things that might be holding us back and learning to embrace them.

Sometimes opening ourselves up to difficult situations can be harder than we think. That's why we have to trust that God will show us how to face those things. Sometimes we might also feel that we shouldn't have to face such difficult things but part of being the change in the world is being that person who does what other people might not be able or willing to do.

In the scripture, the father recognizes that his son has come back home and is coming back for reconciliation. Before the younger son came home I'm sure the father felt disappointed like any parent would and most of all was probably worried about his child.

Maybe even the father felt disappointed with *himself*. He chooses to forgive his son though. With God's help the father tries to put himself into the son's shoes. And that loving choice welcomes the son back into a community who will take care of him; a community who will build him up with God's love.

As Christians, forgiveness is one of the most powerful ways we can be the change. Forgiveness is hard. It is a process. Forgiveness is not something that happens right away. God guides us through that process. Forgiveness is not forgetting. But letting go of anger, resentment, or even hatred. When we do this, we can discover new things in ourselves and in others as well. We can form new bonds. We embrace vulnerability.

I actually connected with the father after experiencing seeing the difficult being embraced. I know that forgiving is not an easy thing to do. I think it is especially hard in situations that maybe feels impossible to forgive, but I realized there is no limit to forgiving when I took a trip with our youth group 1 year ago to Charleston.

We decided on the weekend we went, that on Sunday we would go worship with the congregation of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (*known as Mother Emmanuel*) where there was a shooting 3 years earlier by a white supremacist.

That Sunday, it was inspiring to watch the congregation worship with us after such a devastating tragedy that happened there. When we worshipped with them we were invited up to do faith sharing and even communion. They were so kind and gracious to us.

At the end of the service they gave us a history lesson about the church and even talked about the shooting with us:

They said, many families left after the shooting but some stuck with the church. They explained how they feared for their safety and even installed security cameras. They even had a monitor of the camera footage sitting in their basement for everyone to see. It was very unsettling to listen to. I could've never imagined knowing where to start to try to move on from such a tragedy. But they said that as time went by they decided as Christians, to forgive.

I kept asking myself, how is that possible? How were they able to do that? They said they asked for God's guidance and help. They asked her to help them forgive the shooter. To free them from the hatred and anger they were feeling towards the shooter. That's what I took back with me from that trip. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Forgiveness is healing, healing from being wronged or hurt. Forgiveness is not easy, but it is *possible*. The faithful people of *Mother Emmanuel* embraced the very difficult. They freed themselves from the resentment, anger, and hatred. They dared to to forgive. And God shows us, that it is *possible*.

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Emma: So there really was more to this story!

Paige: Yeah! There's a lot we can learn from others.

Kaegan: We learn from people when we see their humanity.

Paige: And even when change is hard, as Christians we are called to embrace it.

Emma: When we embrace the difficult, we change ourselves and the world.

Paige: Be vulnerable.

Emma: Be open.

Kaegan: Be daring.

All Together: GO, BE THE CHANGE.