Sermon copyright © 2018 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Lent 4C
Peace, Seattle
March 31, 2019
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

When I was driving school bus for the Battle Ground School District down in Clark County, I had a sub route for a while that wound through the hilly backroads between the Main Fork and the East Fork of the Lewis River. The route took me between two small towns: Amboy and Yacolt.

First I headed up toward Amboy, picking up elementary and junior high students who lived along the main highway and dropping the older kids off at the school in town. Then I continued on with the younger kids toward Yacolt picking up other children along the way.

Many of these families lived, quite literally, out in the woods, on the edge of the national forest, just off the small meandering roads that threaded their way between the hills.

When it came to driving a bus, these roads were tricky. Most of them had started life as game trails, were then used by the Cowlitz tribe through the centuries, and then graduated to horse and wagon trails, and eventually gravel and sometimes paved roads.

Here's the thing: when you turned on to one of these roads, you had no way of knowing whether it would go on for miles—perhaps eventually bringing you back into civilization, OR, having starting out paved, it would begin to narrow, turn to gravel, peter out, and finally dead end in some dark, forested hollow.

Not a place where you want to get off-route in a 60 ft bus!

Today we follow the younger son of our parable as he discovers that the road he has taken, the road which seemed to him to hold such promise; the well-paved, upwardly mobile path toward a new life, a new identity, a new existence apart from his family, turns out instead to be a long, meandering descent into exile from which there can be no retreat.

WHEN HE HAD SPENT EVERYTHING, A SEVERE FAMINE TOOK PLACE THROUGHOUT THAT COUNTRY, AND HE BEGAN TO BE IN NEED.

The story goes on from there, of course, but we should, I think, linger here for a while. . .

Linger long enough to remember a time when we were hungry, or desolate, a time when the path to a future we had taken for granted, became a muddy hole at what we now see is the end of the road. And if we cannot remember such a time, let us at least stay here long enough to imagine it.

As we linger here we can remind ourselves, too, that the history of the conversation between God and God's people, is mostly a history of silence. A history not of silent moments or dramatic pauses, but of huge, yawning gaps when we wait for a word that might fill the bowl, turn the road, set the heart to beating again.

This son who now knows need, perhaps for the first time, is learning, too, what it means to wait for such a word, and while he waits he goes down further.

Sermon copyright © 2018 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

SO WE WENT AND HIRED HIMSELF OUT TO ONE OF THE CITIZENS OF THAT COUNTRY, WHO SENT HIM TO HIS FIELDS TO FEED THE PIGS. . . AND HE WOULD GLADLY HAVE FILLED HIMSELF WITH THE PODS THAT THE PIGS WERE EATING; AND NO ONE GAVE HIM ANYTHING.

There is a shadow side to life. And it has found him.

When he was 51 years old, John Donne, the English poet and Anglican priest whose life we remember today, had a "mid-life crisis" when he became severely ill. Four years earlier, his wife had died while giving birth to their 12th child, and now Donne finds himself at the edge of death.

The love poems he'd written earlier in his life, full of wit and passion, no longer issue from his pen. What emerges instead are a series of 23 DEVOTIONS UPON EMERGENT OCCASIONS, in which some of his best-known lines are found, including these:

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
> if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were,
> as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were;
> any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind,
> and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

This younger son, so determined to be the rugged individualist, who acted as if he were an island, convinced he could "make it" on his own without help from anybody, has reached the end of that equation.

He'd left his family and family history—which had seemed so much of a burden—far behind him. But his brilliant idea, his projection of what life could be for him, it turns out, was an illusion. For he hadn't reckoned that the world could be as tough as it turned out to be.

He thought his salvation lay in cutting ties to his family. But as his need mounted, his life hardened, and the road petered out, he had to face the fact that he was wrong.

Maybe if there weren't things like famines or accidents; maybe if there weren't things like lay-offs or health crises, and all sorts of other things beyond our control, maybe, just maybe, we could make it on our own. But that's not the world we live in.

What's more, what Jesus shows us in this story is the necessity of this journey to the life's dark side.

The nature of the spiritual journey—and make no mistake, that's the journey the younger brother is on—is that it takes us (as Annie Dillard says) downward and inward, toward the hardest realities of our lives.[1]

"Why must we go in and down?" asks Parker Palmer. "Because as we do so, we will meet the darkness that we carry within ourselves—the ultimate source of the shadows that we project onto other people. If we do not understand that the enemy is within, we will found a thousand ways of making someone 'out there' into the enemy, becoming [people] who oppress rather than liberate others."

[1] Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. (New York: Harper-Collins, 1982), pp. 94-45. Cited in Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*.(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) p 80

Sermon copyright © 2018 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

"But, says Dillard, if we ride those monsters all the way down, we break through to something precious—to 'the unified field, our complex and inexplicable caring for each other,' to the community we share beneath the broken surface of our lives."[2]

When we come to this place, as the younger brother finally does, then we begin to realize what a gift it is to be part of a family—a community of sisters and brothers, young and old who can walk together, through trial and testing, through grief and joy, supporting one another, sharing our lives.

Most often, like the younger son, we have to become dis-illusioned in order to see the giftedness in where we are and who we are with.

There in the pig-pen, remembering how plentiful things were back home, the lost son "comes to himself." And what does he do when he comes to himself? He rises out of the pigpen and turns his face toward home.

In this parable coming to self means going to others.
While the son is still a long way off, his father—and this is a key detail—his father, who's been scanning the horizon day in and day out for signs of this lost son, this father sees him and runs to welcome him back to community.

Interrupting the boy's speech, the father orders a celebration—
Prepare the fatted calf; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!

In his book, WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE? Philip Yancey tells how, at a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world were debating what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith.[3]

They began their discussion by eliminating possibilities. **Was incarnation unique?**
No. Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form.
How about resurrection? No again. Other religions had accounts of return from death.

The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room.
When he asked what the debate was about, they said they were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. **OH, THAT'S EASY, Lewis said. IT'S GRACE.**

Of all the world's religions, only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.[4]
But the idea of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity...thus the elder brother's complaint.

The gospel, you see, is not at all what we would come up with on our own.

Maybe that's why Jesus talks about grace so often in his parables and demonstrates it so often in his ministry. He knew how difficult it to get a grasp on grace!

Sisters and brothers, today we are invited to "come to ourselves;" to turn toward home, toward the promises of God which offer their choicest fruits in the community of faith. Already, in the middle of our Lenten journey, God's Easter promise runs out to greet us—to place sacred rings on our fingers and to robe us, clothing us in mercy, feeding us at his Table.

---

[2] Ibid.
[3] Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* page 45.
[4] Ibid.

Sermon copyright © 2018 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Here, in this gathering, God also comes out to all of us who are the elder brothers and sisters, comes out to invite us in from fields of resentment; to invite us to move beyond slavish obedience and into lives of abundant joy.

God comes out to each one of us, inviting us in, to embrace and share in his marvelous, extravagant, scandalous grace; grace which transforms both shame and pride; grace that creates a whole new world of reconciliation, community and joy.

Amen.