



The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 10th March, 2024

"Harmony-making and Joy"

A reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Lent.

"Living in Harmony" is this year's Lenten theme.

Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Gospel Story. Luke 15: 11-32

Jesus was a very good storyteller. So, everyone was ready to listen.

"My story is about a father who had two sons", said Jesus. The younger son said to his father, "I hate it around here. If you were dead, then half of your money would be mine." "That made the father very sad. But instead of getting angry he said, 'You can have half of my money. Right now. Here it is.'

So the younger son took the money and left. He went far away from his home. The son spent his money on wild parties and expensive food. He never wrote a letter home. His father wondered if his son had died.

But soon the money was all gone. The son felt very hungry but now he had no food and no money. So he got a job looking after someone's pigs.

"This is awful," he thought. "Here I am looking after these stinky pigs. I hate pigs. I wish I could go back home." The son knew he had made his father very sad. "He'd never let me come back home. Except maybe, if I say I'm sorry. Maybe if I just ask to be a helper, a servant, he might let me come home."

So the son started walking back home. He was still a long way off when he saw his father running down the road toward him. *"Father, I'm so sorry..."* But his father wouldn't let him finish. His father threw his arms around his son and gave him a kiss.

Then the father called to everyone. *"Come to our house. We're having a big party tonight. My son has come home! My son has come home! Let's have a party! Let's celebrate!"*

They had the biggest party you ever saw. But the father noticed that his older son wasn't there. So, the father went looking for him. He found the older son out in the backyard. *"Why aren't you at our party?"* the father asked.

"It's not fair," said the older brother. *"I stayed at home. I was a good boy. I did all the things you asked. That other son of yours ran away and spent all your money. Then when he came home you had a big party. You never had a party for me!"*

"My son," said the father, *"I've been able to show my love for you every day. Your brother was lost. Now he's found. I felt as if your brother was dead. Now he's alive. Let's be glad. Your brother is part of the family again!"*

Reading of Grace

"To be joyful..." (Molly Fumia)

"To be joyful in the universe is a brave and reckless act.

The courage for joy springs not from the certainty of human experience, but the surprise.

Our astonishment at being loved, our bold willingness to love in return –

these wonders promise the possibility of joyfulness,

no matter how often and how harshly love seems to be lost.

Therefore, despite the world's sorrows, we give thanks for our loves, for our joys, and for the continued courage to be happily surprised."

Molly Fumia in "[A Grateful Heart](#)" (M.J. Ryan, Editor)

Witness to the Word

I wonder... What caught your attention in that story?

I know that most of us have heard it or read it many times... did anything 'jump out' at you this time?

The question I just asked is actually my favourite one to ask when we hear or study the Bible, so I'm going to ask it again... and invite you to think about it for a bit.

What caught your attention in the story?(Responses and conversation)

I have another question: "Why might I have chosen it in the context of *"harmony-making and joy"*?"

What are the elements of harmony –making Where's the joy? Who is the story about, for you?
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I'm actually not sure if I chose this story for today, or it chose me.

I was sitting with the theme we've been following – *"Living in Harmony"* – and wondering if my decision to link it with the themes more commonly associated with Advent might have been a bit misguided. The connections of harmony-making with 'hope' and 'peace' came fairly easily to me, but 'joy' had me a bit stumped.

I began to think about 'joy' in active terms – being joyful, if you like – rather than simply a nice feeling. And I realised that I've been talking about 'harmony' the same way: 'harmony- making'. That's the point at which Jesus' story from Luke's Gospel made its appearance in my thinking. It struck me that it's a story of harmony-making - and the lack of it.

The idea that it's also a parable of deep joy, is pretty clear, isn't it. We just need to look to the Dad for that! I see it in the younger son as well, and starkly contrasted with the lack of joy in the older brother. *"This son of yours!"* Says it all really, doesn't it? We can feel sympathy for him, and a sense that he's hard done by, and we probably do. But for Jesus, it's a problem that he can't get beyond that. And, for me, that's where the 'harmony-making' comes in.

This story offers a caution to any thinking that harmony is all sweet and light. The harmony between the father and the younger son is hard won. It's not a matter of sweeping things under the carpet. It might look like that, given the father's response, but we know from so many of Jesus' stories that that's not how he (Jesus) saw things. Grace, forgiveness, and compassion were not the same as indulgence; were not the same as ignoring brokenness and wilfulness.

We're not told, but can imagine that the outpouring of joy on the father's part was part of a journey of soul-searching, a journey of *"where did I go wrong?"*, a journey of *"well, no matter what, he's still my son"*. We can imagine this because we know that Jesus understood the dynamics and complexity of human relationship. And so, the father is able to respond when he sees his son on the road, and we're caught up in his joy!

The younger son, too, has needed to do the work of harmony-making while off with the pigs. I love the expression: *"he came to himself"*. Perhaps 'coming to his senses' is one way to put it, but **"He came to himself"** is deeper: he came to remember who he was, and whose.

Maybe it was the pigfood talking, or maybe he realised that who he was included his father and brother. He also realised that he'd been a self-centred idiot who'd inflicted sadness on his father, and that he shouldn't expect things to be the same. His journey of harmony-making led him home, to the joy of his father and disgust of his brother.

Jesus finishes his story with that awkward conversation between the father and older son, where the son can't understand why his father is throwing a party, and the father can't understand why the son isn't joining in. We could say more about that, but instead, I want to ask one last question:
Why do you think Jesus ended where he did?

I love that Jesus leaves his story 'open', rather than trying to create a 'happily ever after'. In doing so, he makes room for the response of the older brother – and the listeners – to the joy of the father, and to the invitation it held to join in the feast at the table of harmony! Amen.