

I feel particularly heavy this morning as I stand up here about to offer my second sermon in the midst of the Brett Kavanaugh hearings and the committee recommendation that took place this week. I feel responsible to say something as one of your pastors. I feel responsible to say something to you as a woman and a survivor of assault.

If you have felt angry, hypervigilant, or isolated this week, you are not alone. If you have felt frozen, scared, or flooded this week, you are not alone. If you have felt angry on behalf of your family or friends, felt fatigued from the constant barrage of more unsettling news, you are not alone. If you have felt nothing, if you have felt defensive or shut down, you are not alone. This sermon might be triggering for some of you, and if it is, please give yourself what you need. If that's a walk in the narthex, a moment to step out, a child to play with in the back, do what you need to do right now. Christian communities do not condone the gaslighting, public shaming, and egregious misuse of the highest seats of government. When people were asked to swear their allegiance to truth before one another and before God in order to testify these past two weeks, God was used as a shield for the oppressors. God is not a shield for the oppressors. God is a shield for the oppressed.

I want to know-- how long will survivors need to tell their stories and be silenced? I want to know-- how long will the patriarchal, misogynistic gaze scrutinize women, shame women, and tell women that we have no power? Because what happened this week is not the message that any of us need to metabolize. The proceedings have not been a hopeful account of justice prevailing. Instead, the proceedings of the Senate Committee have been an aggressive act, one that highlights some of the ugliest parts of our world. This is not the world God invites us to create together.

When we turn to the text before us this morning, we see a different kind of justice--a justice born out of love. We see the kind of justice that can take place when a child repents and comes home, a parent embraces without a need for an apology, and another child grapples with their limited imagination of love.

Our parable this morning is from the gospel of Luke, and Jesus tells it because some of the religious leaders are complaining about Jesus hanging out with sinners and tax collectors. He tells this parable of the prodigal son in response to their misunderstanding of what kind of community Jesus is creating. We will have some interviews of our own this morning, but with the family in the parable that we've just heard. I've chosen to cast all of the members of the family as women as a reminder of the counter-narratives alive in this parable and in us.

I also want to make it clear that I am not making any direct correlations between the participants of the hearings and the characters in this parable. Rather, I am using the concepts of interview and interrogation as vehicles for understanding the way we relate to one another as human beings. God does not invite us into a judgmental space when we come together as a community. Yes, God does make it clear what justice looks like and what our roles are to be in bringing that justice to life. But God does not tell us to offer unnecessary scrutiny or to use our spirituality as a weapon. When we engage in curious and authentic moments with one another, that is when we are truly changed.

The Homecoming Case

Roles: interviewer (I), younger sibling (YS), older sibling (OS), parent (P)

I: I'd like to begin today's interview with the prodigal family, but before I do, allow me to clarify something for the audience. The court cannot charge this family with anything because this was all a private matter. The parent had the legal right to decide when and how to give out the inheritance. There has been no request from the country where the younger one lived previously for extradition, as they didn't commit any crimes.

This family is here today for a different kind of trial - a trial of character. We live in a time where trials of character are happening in our country, but accountability does not seem to exist. And those who courageously speak out for the sake of justice are silenced and disbelieved. Because of this, we are looking at a different kind of justice--the kind that does not fit with our frames of right and wrong, the kind that does not buy into shame-based culture, the kind that does not shrink at the sight of wrongdoing, but the kind of justice that embraces those who choose to come home to one another, to

themselves, and to God. An unheard-of situation took place involving an inheritance, betrayal, and forgiveness. I'd like to invite the first member of the family, the younger sibling, to share their version of the story. Tell us, in your own words, what happened.

YS: A few years ago, I went to my mother and told her that I wanted my inheritance before she died. My mother said yes, and divided her property up between the two of us - I mean, my older sister and I. My parent agreed and gave me everything that was rightfully mine, so I took off.

With all my stuff in suitcases, I bought a ticket for a country I'd always wanted to visit, and ended up staying there. I wanted to spend my inheritance while I was young and able to enjoy it. I never called home on holidays or birthdays. I never even told them my new address or if I made it safely.

I had a great time - I had such a good time, in fact, that I spent every last dollar. Then I had to start selling my stuff in order to buy food. I ended up finding work at a hostel as a janitor. They let me sleep in the broom closet in exchange for work.

One morning, as I was making my rounds cleaning the bathrooms, I saw myself in the mirror. I didn't realize how different I looked. Something felt unusual that morning--it's hard to explain. I had become so used to the life I was leading. It was like seeing myself for the first time. I said to my reflection, "Mom's employees have it much better off than I do. I'm going home. I'm going to tell Mom that I'm sorry that I spent everything and treated her like crap. Maybe she'll let me work for her if she's feeling generous."

I hid my passport in an old paint can in the back of the supply closet so no one could steal it. I couldn't afford a plane ticket, so I had to hitchhike my way back home. I rode in semi trucks and on trains. When I got there, I stopped by our mailbox on the main road and I braced myself.

Everything looked the same - the fields, the house, the barns in the distance. Everything looked the same - but I felt different. I was afraid of what I would find out when I walked up to the door. I didn't even know if my parents were still alive.

I: So, what kind of response did you receive when you got home?

YS: Before I could start walking up the driveway, my mom burst open the door. She saw me at the end of the drive, and shouted my name. She started running towards me, put her arms around me, and kissed me. This is before I started talking. I hadn't even told her how sorry I was for what I'd done or how I'd treated our family.

I said to her, "Mom, I'm so sorry for treating you all like you didn't matter. I'm sorry for taking my inheritance and leaving. I don't deserve to be your child." She acted like none of that mattered; in fact, she called out to the housekeeper and asked her to start making my favorite foods and find me new clothes to wear.

I: Thank you for sharing your account of the story. Now I'd like to hear your older sibling's take on the situation. What was that like for you, as the child who chose to stay and work for your mother?

OS: I was livid. I felt so betrayed by my parents and the values that they taught me. I heard the party happening back at the house, and I was perplexed at first. It wasn't a religious holiday, none of our employees were having a wedding, and no birthdays were coming up. I asked one of the junior ranchers what was going on, and he told me that my sister had returned. I left my tractor in the field and ran to the house.

Sure enough, there she was, partying it up with our extended family and friends like nothing had ever happened. I was angry because I had followed the traditions of our community and played by the rules. I did not dare ask for my inheritance early, as that feels disrespectful to the living. I chose to stay and work the land like my mother did, and her mother did before her.

My mom never said to me, "Let's kill one of our steers and throw a big party." But the moment my little sister walks up the lane, she pulls out all the stops. Did I ever get a party to throw? Not at all. It was the principle of the thing that got me. I refused to enter the house and even greet my sister. I was seething. I thought I had the right to be angry at her for all the hurt she'd caused my parents and the shame she'd brought on our family.

I: How did your mom respond to you?

OS: She told me that everything she had belonged to me already and that I am always around. Which I guess was meant to reassure me somehow or help me let go of my anger. I didn't realize how bitter I was until I saw my sister smiling and celebrating inside. I didn't realize how much I resented her, although she had messed up in the biggest ways possible. I didn't realize how small I had believed my mother's heart was towards me--why hadn't I ever asked for a party? And did my mom ask me to work like a slave or was that me this whole time? What was I trying to prove, anyway?

P: When my child asked me for their inheritance, I decided to give it to her. Whatever was mine was hers. It was her decision to use it now instead of using it later. When I saw her at the end of the drive, I thought my eyesight was going bad at first. I couldn't help myself from running. I was so overcome with emotion I couldn't speak. And then, when I could, all I wanted to do was celebrate her return. It didn't matter to me that she had been gone for years and I hadn't heard from her in a long time. What mattered to me was that they were back.

S: How did your older child take this homecoming?

P: She fought me on it. Well, she flat out refused to come inside and see her sister. I went outside to beg her to join the party. When I said to her that she always had a place with me and that would never change, she misunderstood me. She thought I was treating her sister like she was more important; she couldn't hold my love for both of them in her hands. I was so happy to have her sister home that I wanted her to join in celebrating with all of us. When she asked me to explain why she'd never had a party like the one her sister was having inside, it felt like comparing apples to oranges. My love for them both in their uniqueness was in question. All I could say was, "My love for you will never change. Your sister has come back from the grave, and is inside our house right now. Don't you want to come in and celebrate that?"

I: Let me backtrack a little bit, because I need some clarity from you. It seems that it didn't matter to you that your younger daughter said she was sorry. Am I misunderstanding you?

P: Not a bit. The state of her heart mattered to me. But what mattered to me most was that my child came home. When she left a few years ago, I felt like she had died. I heard nothing from her. I didn't know if my child was still alive. The scenarios I ran over again and again in my mind--knowing she didn't want to speak to me or that she had died and I had no idea--neither was better than the other. So when I saw her leaning on the mailbox at the end of the drive, my dormant hope came back to life. It was a moment I had imagined, and never knew I would have the chance to experience.

I: Thank you for your time, your honesty, and for sharing your accounts. Based on the evidence, the only charges I can lay out are that you came home to one another and to yourselves. And you did this with courage.

Michele: All of us are the parent, the older sibling, and the younger sibling at different times in our lives. We are trying to find our way through the shame we heap on ourselves, the shame others heap on us, and the shame we heap on others. The most destructive people are the ones who cannot own their mistakes--the ones who cannot bear to return home. One way we can return home is through asking good questions - good questions of ourselves, our family, our friends, and the people sitting in the pews next you. We can be the way home for one another, if we're willing to show up.

Power exists, not through exploiting the story of someone else, but by listening to someone one. Power exists in receiving someone as they walk up to the door, repentant. Power exists through self-examination--through asking hard questions of ourselves

when we'd rather look away. When we pass the mic, so to speak, we allow someone else to get their voice in the room and share their truth.

We try to choose a better way, but we cannot do it on our own strength. Jesus shows us how to choose the better way--to choose vulnerability and courage. To choose to sit down with the people that others despise. To choose to stand with our oppressed siblings and ask for justice. To choose to tell your story--your beautiful, complicated, blessed story--and know you are not alone.