

**“The Spiritual Practice of Acceptance”**  
**June 21, 2020-Father’s Day**  
**Luke 15:11-24**

*It seems fitting for Father’s Day that we should study the story of the Prodigal Son. The Father-Child relationship often is not easy, full of contradictions and power struggles, but also full of an abiding love and a bond not easily broken. Such is our relationship with God—complicated and strained at times. But God’s love overcomes all and nothing-nothing-can separate us from the one who wonderfully made us.*

*From Luke’s Gospel, the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter, verses 11-24. Feel the love God has for all God’s children:*

Then [Jesus] said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’”

“So, the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to suffer. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

“That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

“But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

*Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

### The Spiritual Practice of Acceptance

As we enter week 15 of our quarantine, I'd like to offer you a poem written by author and artist, Jan L. Richardson. She calls it,

#### *Wilderness Prayer*

*I am not asking you  
to take this wilderness from me,  
to remove this place of starkness where I come to know  
the wildness within me,  
where I come to learn to call the names  
of the ravenous beasts  
that pace inside me,  
to finger the brambles  
that snake through my veins,  
to taste the thirst  
that tugs at my tongue.*

*But send me  
tough angels,  
sweet wine,  
strong bread;  
just enough.*

The characters we see in this scripture are on a journey, a wilderness journey of love and faith, of holding on and letting go, of hedging one's bet and risking it all, of breaking out and coming home again. The old man, the young, impetuous son, the brother left behind—they are all children of a father. They all have to journey into the wilderness. They all have to learn the meaning of God's unconditional love. They all have to find their way home, even if it means "coming home," as John Denver sang, "to a place they've never been before."

The characters we have met in the musical, *"Rent,"* are all on a journey, too. They are the children of fathers that at some point along the timeline of life, have had to accept that they, too, have a wilderness to embrace. The fathers may never have known their child, may have watched their daughters and sons grow up right under their watchful eyes or from afar, or may have left this earth before their progeny set out from the family found to find their own lives.

In all these possibilities, parents are forced, all of them are forced at some point in their children's lives, to engage The Spiritual Practice of Acceptance.

In Luke's day, the Pharisees were holding on for dear life to everything they had learned about how to be in right relationship with God. They had lost their power and influence with the destruction of their Second Temple. While decades earlier they had been able to broker an uneasy peace with the Roman authorities with the payment of taxes and tight control over the Jews, Jesus had blown the cover off that tent, calling out injustice and heresy against God's holy will. His followers had taken up the cause after his death, keeping the heat on the Pharisees. When Rome broke with Judaism in the mid-80s, the Pharisees, still held by their grief and anxiety, were philosophically the people promoting standing pat and garnering what was left, rather than moving ahead.

The wilderness was coming for them whether they liked it or not. In Luke's theology the journey awaits all of us and it is the journey and not the destination that is the thing that defines us. The Prodigal Son went on his journey into wilderness willingly; his father had the wilderness come for him, unwillingly. Nevertheless, each had to accept that the parent-child relationship was maturing, changing. Each had to accept the path laid before him. The Prodigal went skipping and jumping upon it, not looking back as his brother and his father worried after him.

Perhaps the tight group of friends in *"Rent"* are young adults straight out of the Prodigal's story. At varying points in their life, they all left home. Some traveled to New York City with its bright lights in their eyes, like Roger, who is going to write the next great American song, or Mark, who traveled only from Scarsdale to the big city, there hoping to write the great American screenplay. Angel was looking for true love, Mimi was looking for a way out of abuse and poverty, Tom Collins had it in his mind that he would find eager college minds hungry for Philosophy, and Joanne was looking for work as a lawyer and true love with a woman who could give her whole-hearted love.

Everyone has a journey and we all have to accept the wilderness time that comes with it. Barbara Brown Taylor, my theological heroine, writes about wilderness journey and acceptance in a book I have recommended to you before, *An Altar in the World*. She writes,

To detach the walking from the destination is in fact one of the best ways to recognize the altars you are passing right by all the time. The journey is the point. The walking is the thing...

In my life, I have lost my way more times than I can count...While none of these displacements was pleasant at first, I would not give a single one of them back. I have found things while I was lost that I might never have discovered if I had stayed on the path.

The Spiritual Practice of Acceptance requires that we set out on a path expecting to be serenaded by the angels but prepared to welcome both the ravenous beasts and the brambles that snake through our veins. Roger and Mimi did not set out to become heroin addicts; Joanne did not set out to have her heart broken by Maureen, and Angel did not wish upon himself the AIDS virus that would take his life just when he had found the love that had saved it. They accepted their fate, even as they fiercely held on to their friendships, their community, and their faith in the love cultured therein.

Father Gregory Boyle, in another of my all-time favorite books, *Tattoos on the Heart*, addresses this notion of acceptance. When I first saw the film, *Rent*, I fell in love with it but had a hard time accepting the life choices of its characters. Never a lover of New York City in the first place, the storyline represented for me all the negative stereotypes I held about it—high crime, dirty, dark streets, drugs—the Bohemian lifestyle the cast sings of when at their local watering hole. There they face off against all their disapproving father images in the character of the big-time, stuff-shirted property developer. And they, as counter-culturalists, face off also against their brother who has sold out to the establishment, just like the brother in the scripture lesson who stays home with the father while the prodigal son takes his inheritance and runs away to the big city life.

Father Boyle counsels us in the Spiritual Practice of Acceptance thusly:

We have a chance, sometimes, to create a new jurisdiction, a place of astonishing mutuality, whenever we close both eyes of judgment and open the other eye to pay attention.

This is admittedly a difficult spiritual practice to begin, especially if we were raised in traditional households with traditional lines of authority and expectations. Judgment comes easy to us in observing things with which we have no personal familiarity and no studied tolerance. In this Pride Month, we are asked by our LGBTQA loved ones to practice acceptance, to lead with love, and to send angels, not demons of judgment and rejection, to their wilderness journey. We are asked, on this Juneteenth weekend, to take a wilderness journey of our own away from our embedded racism and white privilege, walking the path of faith with both eyes open to what we might discover in our own autobiographies and carefully ingrained judgments, accepting that our story is not the same story as other Americans whom we call “people of color.”

*Rent* helps us to see past the strangeness of Angel's drag queen getups into the very heart of Christ, for he represents in the story pure love and pure acceptance of that over which he has no control. *Rent* helps us to see Mimi not as a sex worker and junkie, but as a Latina woman trying to make it on her own in a society stacked against her, in an apartment where she has to choose between having the heat on or a meal for her grumbling stomach. *Rent* helps us to see how friends support each other despite their mistakes, miscalculations, vulnerabilities, and frailties. When they sing in round-robin song at the Life Support meeting for people with AIDS, "Will I lose my dignity, will someone care? Will I wake tomorrow, from this nightmare?" we learn that it takes all of them, loving together in acceptance, to answer with a resounding and comforting, "Yes! I care—and I will be there for you, no matter what."

This is what the father says to his impetuous son as he watches his offspring set out on his reckless journey.

This is what the community of *Rent* demonstrates with the passing of every 525 thousand 600 minutes, every year in the "life of friends." This is what Jesus says to his disciples in the story of the Prodigal Son, and this is what God in the father image says to us this day.

The wilderness is here. The path lies before us. The Spiritual Practice of Acceptance says do not resist the journey; you do not travel alone, for the tough angels are with you, bringing you sweet wine and strong bread for the way; just enough.

May It Be So.

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