

Dual Citizenship: We Tell the Truth About Who We Are
Luke 15:11-32

It's been a week. For all the unsettling experiences we've had over the last eight months, there has been nothing quite like the wringing-out of this election week. We sat on the edges of our seats and we slumped in our chairs. We were actors in a nation-wide stomach churning. Everyone I know lost sleep. A couple of afternoons during the week, when I walked across the street to the Rancho shopping center to meet someone, or for an afternoon stretch, even the children hanging out in front of the yogurt store were re-hashing election results with each other, repeating what they'd heard in the news or from their parents. Middle schoolers, children even younger than that. It was this week as if all of the last year and more—our hopes, our disappointments, our fears, our anger—was bundled up in one national decision, this one opportunity to have our say, to make something change.

Did we do it? Is there redemption, or at least relief, in this week's election of a new government for the United States of America? Do we feel better, now that we have spoken, as though we've once again put our stamp of approval on how the future will be led?

Certainly for some. There are winners and losers in every contest, every election. If some of us are unhappy with the results, others are supposed to feel good. But there is also plenty of disappointment to go around—if not with the outcome, then with one another. At the massive disconnect among people in this country. The other side's refusal to see what seems so obvious, or to accept what for me seems like common human decency.

Maybe the closeness of this election result destroyed your faith in America's humanity. Maybe it made you worry for a way of life that now feels at risk. Whatever your worry, half the people in this country join you in that fear. The other half fear what you hoped for.

We have now, just as we do every four years, a chance to start again, to rebuild, to find and name a common American identity, our commitment to the common good. When I asked you last week to write on your connection card what your prayer for this nation would be at the inauguration of the next President, you shared, overwhelmingly, one thought: unity, reconciliation, forgiveness, healing. A shared commitment to positive values; a broad justice.

Like many prayers, the answer to this one is in our own hands. Will we do it? Can we do it? Am I willing to acknowledge that my side is as responsible for closed-mindedness as 'they' are? Do we really have the persistence, and the patience, to reach toward one another now, to include and empower *everyone* in this country, even people who don't want exactly the same things we do?

I don't know. The count on *that* decision is not yet complete.

Do you remember Padraig O'Tuama, the wonderful Irish poet and theologian who was here with us last November? Padraig's writing has taught me much more than I knew before about the

conflict that simmered and sometimes flared in Ireland for thirty years, until the Good Friday agreement was signed in 1998. Irish Catholics, mostly in the northern part of the country, wanted a united and independent Ireland. Irish Protestants, from the south, were loyal to the British Commonwealth. The conflict was far more complex than that, of course. The political argument swept up and carried with it cultural differences, and religious differences, and attitudes about change. Sometimes the country's division spilled into violence; people feared one another. Acts of terrorism regularly disrupted their life—house burnings; bombs smuggled into bars, even schools, even hospitals. It was never called a war, because never more than a thousand people died in a year. But mutual suspicion and blame and scapegoating ate away at the spirit of a whole country. For thirty years.

It was called *The Troubles*. Everyone called it The Troubles. 'Sorry for your troubles' became the Irish greeting to one another, as if the tears in the fabric of their common life could never be mended. As if hatred had moved in among them like a bad neighbor and decided to stay. I've wondered: Is this what's happening in America now? Will 'sorry for your troubles' be the most empathetic thing we're able to say to a stranger we meet in Indiana, or Bakersfield?

A few moments ago we read Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. I know—you've heard it a thousand times. But one of the things that makes that story powerful—one of the reasons we call it *Scripture*—is that it is endlessly capable of new meaning. You turn it in a different direction, or hold it at a different angle, and it looks new again. Tells a different story. Reflects the light differently on your life.

Today, right now, I think maybe this story captures some new truth about who we are as Americans. See what you think.

This story isn't just about a son, because in fact there are *two* sons in this story. And a father. That father wanted what every good father wants: he wanted his family to be whole, united, at peace. He longed for his two children, those brothers, to love each other with the same kind of devotion he felt to each of them. But they were so different. The younger son was headstrong, rebellious. It seemed like all he wanted was to defy his family's traditions, his father's expectations. The older son was obedient, responsible. A little sullen and resentful sometimes, but that kid was totally focused: getting good grades, doing the right thing.

In this story the younger son—the one we call the *prodigal*—doesn't care one bit about the family's norms and traditions and healthy habits. He crashes right through the boundaries of his family. Evidently he *prefers* being with people who have no morals or principles. He *intentionally* squanders money. He attracts immoral friends. He lies. His behavior makes no sense; it's outrageous. Only when he finally sees that he's wandered so far from home that he's truly isolated and alone, does he think about anyone else. And so he fashions a story-line to get himself back into his father's household. It's a good story, about how he's now seen the light; that he loves and misses home so much, he's willing to live like a servant just to be back there. Has hunger itself reformed him? Maybe, but that isn't usually how the stories of Jesus work. Is he ready to misrepresent his motivations to his father? He might be.

But the state of that boy's heart doesn't really much matter in this story Jesus tells. The quality of his repentance seems not to be the point. When the son is barely in sight of the family homestead, his father runs toward him. He scoops him into a hug. That whole planned speech about remorse? It never happens. The father never asks for an explanation. The son never promises that he won't run away or steal his father's assets again. The father takes this wayward child as he is, flaws and suspect motives fully on display. All that matters is that his children are under the same roof again, that his family is intact.

But the father has more than one son. And no sooner has he thrown his loving arm firmly around his younger son's shoulders, than the older son steps out of the embrace. 'It's just not right!' that older kid mutters when he sees the joy that this ne'er-do-well's homecoming has brought to their father. It doesn't matter that this older son has lived well in his father's care, or that the father pledges that there are even more blessings ahead. There will be no justice until his brother's bad behavior is named, called out, punished. He simply cannot abide this lack of accountability, his father's undisciplined, squandered forgiveness.

It's important to remember that the story ends unresolved. We never find out whether the older son goes into the party the father is urging him to join, or whether he sulks in his bedroom for the rest of the night. The father, for all his outpouring of generosity, his willingness to twist himself into a pretzel for the sake of love, cannot make happen what he wants most: for his family to come together, for his children to love each other the way he loves them. What he hopes for fails because of his children's disdain—not for him, but for each other. His family's wholeness is beyond the father's reach.

Sometimes we read the stories of Jesus and think he's telling us to be as good as God is. We're probably wrong about that most of the time. In this story, I'm sure that's true. We are not the father in this story. I doubt it ever occurred to Jesus that we might imagine ourselves capable of the kind of unconditional forgiveness and faithfulness that dad offered his children. We are one of the sons, or maybe we're both of them. Rebellious, insistent that given our fair share, we can take care of ourselves. Or sure we've been doing the right thing all along, and a little resentful that everyone else hasn't noticed. Either way, too stiff to bend toward each other. Too disappointed in one another to enter the party that's been prepared to welcome all of us.

This story says we don't have to create, or even prepare, that celebration, because it's already there. It always has been. You just have to get over your resistance to going in. Because *resist* is what we do—sometimes because we're afraid we're under-qualified for the invitation and sometimes because we stand outside the door, suspicious of all the riffraff who surely were admitted by mistake.

Our friend Padraig was, for some years, the director of a community in northern Ireland called Corrymeela. The community began during The Troubles, a place of peace inside a place of division. The practice of the Corrymeela community is to provide a space where people from different sides of the troubles tell and listen to each other's stories. Stories of how they've been harmed, and how, consciously and unconsciously, they've hurt one another. They stay long enough for the tears they walk in with, the kind that come from deep pain, to become the kind of tears that spring to your eyes when someone is extraordinarily and unexpectedly kind to you.

They practice the language of fruitful disagreement; they learn to speak about what's wrong without blaming someone else. They believe it takes more courage to argue with someone in a room than it does to never enter the room. That's the courage that is transforming them, and it is healing their country. I wonder if it can work for ours too.

'Sorry for your troubles' was never God's hope for creation. We who follow Jesus know that, maybe more than anybody. We live by the story that says that what God wants—more than adoration, more than right belief, more than anything—is for us to love *each other*. The party—the wide-open, welcoming space—has already been prepared. So let's get out of the corners we've retreated into, and let's go in.