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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 15:1-32

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Inclusion

Summer of stories, our sermon series for this season of 2021. We tell stories every day; we tell stories to show who we are and where we're from; we tell stories so that people can relate to us and hopefully include us in their stories too; we tell stories so that we can hopefully live on beyond our years in the stories and memories of others. We tell stories because stories shape us and guide us. We are a part of a much larger story, told and retold in the scriptures. This summer, we look at a selection of stories, specifically the parables of Jesus of Nazareth, to help orient us in the great story that God has been telling through his people, through Jesus, and now through us, the church.

Ten years ago in August, I went to Lesotho, a mountainous, tiny country entirely surrounded by the nation of South Africa. I participated in the Serving And Learning Together program through Mennonite Central Committee. My work in Maphutseng, the village where I stayed, was at the elementary school where I would first teach 5th grade math. In this particular program, the goal is for each service-worker to live with one family, their host family for the duration of their stay. This host family serves as a bridge between cultures, a welcomed space for workers to learn about their new context and the people who live there outside of their work space. When we arrived in Maphutseng, I did not have a host family figured out yet. After a month, it was decided that I would live with two of the workers at the local farm-training center, an older woman who worked in the office named 'Me Ntsebo and a younger farm-worker close

to my age named Rorisang. As I was reading these stories in Luke and reflecting on my experience in Lesotho, I realized in some ways that I was lost before I had a host family. And when I found out that I would be living with someone, I had this sense of relief, of being found, of having a place. My question was answered: Is there space for me with you where you are? This question of inclusion is the core of Luke 15: Is there space for me with you where you are?

The pharisees and scribes, the people who supposedly know God best, are flabbergasted that Jesus creates space at the table with sinners and tax collectors and eats with them. We must remember that in the first century, who you ate with was an extension of your commitment to God's covenant and God's holiness. God had called God's people to holy living, shown through the Pharisees' intense focus on hand-washing and proper table fellowship for ritual purity. If their ancestors' time in exile had taught them anything, these religious leaders were certain that God had sent them to Babylon for not abiding by God's covenant, so Jesus's challenge of opening table fellowship and including sinners and traitorous tax collectors could not reflect true worship of the God of Israel. Jesus takes their criticism in stride and tells these three stories.

On the first hearing of these stories, we are asked to identify with the experience of a shepherd, a poor woman, and a foolish father. Remember our question: is there space for me with you where you are? Because of where we are and the kind of world that we live in, we do not hear the way that Jesus is testing his audience. The Pharisees and scribes have spent their entire lives making sure that they are not on the same level or status as shepherds, women, foolish fathers, or wanderings sons. Shepherds were only slightly higher in status than women, yet both had few, if any, rights in the community. Foolish fathers had little respect or honor for they had what was rightly coming to them, while wandering sons who had abandoned the teaching of their parents were obviously outside of God's covenant. But if we only focus on

these outsiders' actions, we miss the reference to God's justice for the community: to include the widow, the orphan, and the stranger; the poor woman, the lost son, and the wandering shepherd.

As we continue to reflect on our question (Is there room for me with you where you are?), here are some other interesting notes to highlight how challenging these stories might have been for this first-century audience: shepherds tended their flocks in pairs, so one leaving to seek out a lost sheep would not have been a decision between the safety of the flock and the safety of the one lost sheep as I have heard this story sometimes thought about; also, the woman's ten drachmas or coins were most likely her savings; a drachma was payment for a day's work, so the woman searches her entire house because it would take another full day to get such a coin back; this might be a gut-punch for the religious leaders, who were tithing even their spices to the temple to make sure that they were in right standing with God's covenant, an obvious place of privilege; in the third story, what father in his right mind would give half of his retirement to his son before he has passed? What child is prepared to take on all of that inheritance, so why wouldn't the parent have realized that such an extravagant act would end poorly?

The third story comes into clearer focus when the elder brother enters the scene. He hears the celebration as he returns from working in the fields, and he is outraged that his father is having a party for his irresponsible brother, who has returned after wasting his inheritance. Jesus has now drawn a direct line between the religious leaders and the older brother. Not only that, Jesus has connected this foolish father and God, our father. If we are being asked to think of a foolish, short-sighted father as a possible way of understanding God, then is Jesus also asking us to imagine God as a shepherd searching for lost sheep or even a poor woman searching for a lost coin? Is there room for these stories in your story of who God is?

We center ourselves again in our question: Is there room for me with you where you are? Whose stories are you willing or not willing to include in your story? Is there room for your enemy in your story? Is there room for an addict or a person with disabilities in your story? Is there room for a wandering son or sibling whom you have longed to connect with again? Is there room for me with you where you are? We listen this morning and wonder at God's love and care in seeking out each one of us, in including us in the great story that has been unfolding since God created this beautiful universe. We wonder at how these stories continue to challenge us in how we think about God, our neighbors, and the most vulnerable, those people whose stories we may not include in ours: the immigrant, the stranger, the orphan, the single parent, the person of color, our enemy even, in our midst.