

Sermon Text for April 24, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 45:1-9, Luke 15:11-32 *“Confirmation Sunday”*

So, traditionally on youth Sunday it is a youth who preaches and they probably preach for about 7 minutes and say Amen and you all get a 15 minute break over what I normally preach. Not this year. The youth did choose both of the Scriptures that we are looking at today, our confirmation class kids that is. This year was a unique year, we had three boys and they chose Bible stories that reflected a desired relationship between a son and his family, but most specifically his father.

Joseph in Genesis reveals himself to his brothers, these brothers who sold him to slavery but is able to understand that even that was part of God’s plan, and he ends this reveal by asking how his father was. He so wanted to see his father and feel loved by his father. This story is ultimately about Joseph feeling that deep need to be wanted by his own family, to be loved by his own family, even though they had turned their backs on him. We all want to feel wanted, like we belong, a part of a family that will embrace us, receive us, and never, ever reject us no matter what we go through in life.

That takes us to the prodigal son, doesn’t it. They insisted that we read the entire story because each of these boys is the oldest son of a family of boys. They should know that the oldest son doesn’t come across great in this story, but they wanted it as a reminder that even while they tend to be the most responsible in their family, God loves them equally as God loves their little brothers.

But this welcoming back of the father of the son who turned his back on his family is what they understand today to be the church for them. A place where they feel safe, welcomed, accepted, invited to participate and be an integral part. None of these boys feel as if they are just included because of someone else, but rather that they are valued because of who they are and what they have to offer and bring to the life of the church. Each of these boys has already been actively involved in the life of the church.

That has been our history here at the church at least, and I can only speak for the time since I was here, over these last 11 years. Every single person who steps through these doors is valued equally and is a part of this family that will be accepted and received into the life of the church regardless of any barriers that society or the church itself may place upon people for whatever reason.

I went back over the last confirmation classes and the youth Sundays and I thought it might be interesting in pointing out who has walked through these doors and we have to ask a question, do we continue to value them as one of our own?

Read the list:

Over the last 30 years millions of youth have disappeared from our churches across the United States. Did you know that according to the Gallup poll 8 out of 10 kids leave the church before they get out of high school? Think of the churches that have had an impact on your lives. Count how many have actually made a difference. I had 7 different churches and 4 different denominations as a child growing up, and I was a pastor's kid.

What kind of nurturing did you receive growing up from the church? Well, in the Bronkema family we had to go to church whether we liked it or not. The older three Bronkema boys did it with a smile on their face and I went kicking and screaming. I remember being kicked out of Sunday School a few times, and not being the best influence in the youth group. For some kids, you just expect the worst from them, and when you do, well they usually surpass your worst expectations.

Do you realize that each of these children as they are growing up in the church will have they say about 25,000 opportunities to connect with an adult who will show them the real authentic Gospel of the unconditional love of Jesus Christ which is found in unconditional acceptance, something we call grace. And we can choose to scold them and yell at them for leaving the church early or for dropping their crumbs around, or we can choose to greet them with a smile and a hug.

But so often we feel as if in some way the kids have to earn it before we give it to them. If that happens then we set them up for rejection and it becomes fairly obvious that they aren't wanted. Think of the last time you knew you weren't wanted. When you walked into the room and the body language says it all. Kids feel that and when they do they want to get out of that room, out of that church as fast as they can. In this church a child must be able to walk in and see that it is filled with people who have a nurturing approach and want to gather the children under their wings as Jesus did on that day he headed into Jerusalem.

You know the earliest church had to learn the hard way from Jesus. Remember what happened in Matthew 19:13-15. Jesus, the master is teaching on a hillside, mostly to adults and these young parents start making their way to the master to hear better and maybe to have their kids actually see him and experience him.

Well, the disciples see this happening and they cut off the young parents and their children. What do you think you're doing. Can't you tell that he is busy, with adults? He doesn't have time for you now. Jesus his voice cracking like a whip over the people says: What are you doing? Let the children come unto me it is not my will that even one should perish. We need to foster that attitude that not a single one of these kids will be lost.

I remember in a church growing up and we would have coffee hour just like we have here. We would race over to the fellowship hall after the service so that we could be the first there, grab a fistful of cookies and then like squirrels go and hide somewhere with our stash so that nobody could bother us. One day an adult indignantly went up to the pastor and said, they are stealing our cookies, can't you do something. There was a collective snarl that gathered on the people's faces when they saw us coming. The church can't live without the youth and children running around, taking cookies, dancing in the fellowship hall, disrupting the normalcy of life so that they know that they are accepted.

Did you know that 95% of people who come to know Christ come to know him before they turn 20, and the church is losing these kids. These kids' first experience of who Jesus is, is going to be interpreted through what you do and your love and acceptance of them. Our goal as a church is that every single adult Christian who is active in this church will come to know that they have been called to give that unconditional love that they have known and felt to others, especially children.

I felt the love of God through a youth pastor who never gave up on me. Still hasn't. He still prays for me, writes to me. He was imaging God in Christ for me. God made my youth pastor his friend. And that youth pastor, Big Al, made that boy named Bobby his friend for God's sake, and it was all about nurture.

Every single adult here can release the transforming power of God's friendship that they have experienced in Jesus Christ. Our kids are looking now in every dry well for that contagious community. Let's be that community to them, and to each other. It's not an answer to the why they are leaving, but at least it gives us something to do in order to interpret in some way or shape our responsibilities for children and youth.