

I've heard it said that there are five love languages. I'm no expert, but I have to assume that one of those love languages is iced coffee. At least, that's what it is for me. The way to my heart is through a medium iced coffee with caramel and milk.

And my husband Keith knows this. He is well aware. All throughout this pandemic, whenever he's had to go out (which is still a pretty rare occurrence, even now), he always thinks to stop by the Dunkin' drive-thru and picks up an iced coffee for me. That's how he shows me he's thinking of me. He proves it... with a medium iced coffee, caramel and milk. Seriously: who needs flowers when you can have caffeine and a caramel swirl?

It's a small thing, sure. But then, small things matter. Relationships are built on the small things. Care and concern and compassion can be found in the small things... even things as small as a surprise iced coffee on a hot summer afternoon.

Now hold that thought (and sip your coffee, if you have one in front of you -- see, there are benefits to online worship) as we launch into the next installment of our August sermon series. Throughout the month of August -- now the sixth month in this new reality of social distancing -- we're talking about distance. Why not? We're feeling distance right now. We have distance on the brain. And we find distance in scripture, too. We find story after story in which our God works with distance, and works in spite of distance, and makes distance work for God's purposes. Maybe those scripture stories about a God who navigates distance can help us navigate the distance we're experiencing these days.

Today's story of "distance" comes from what is perhaps my favorite chapter in all of scripture: Luke 15, the parables of lost things. They're all here, these lost-and-found parables. There's the shepherd who has one hundred sheep, loses one, and leaves the other ninety-nine to pursue the one that is lost. (When he finds the sheep, he throws a party to celebrate.) Then there's the woman who has ten silver coins, loses one, and searches high

and low for it. (When she finds the coin, she throws a party to celebrate.) At this point, with the lost sheep and the lost coins, Jesus has hit his storytelling groove. (Gosh, I like Jesus so much.) And in that storytelling groove, he continues with the story of the man who has two sons, “loses” one, and watches and waits for his return. (Spoiler alert: when he finds the son, he throws a party to celebrate.) Lost sheep. Lost coins. Lost son. Or, as we more commonly refer to it: “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

In the scripture that Pastor Debbie read for us earlier, Jesus introduces us to a man with two sons. The younger son goes to his father, asking for what amounts to an advance on his inheritance, which he quickly wastes by living it up in some far-off country. (That’s why it’s generally called “the parable of the prodigal son” -- “prodigal” means “wasteful.”) Such a life leaves him desperate and impoverished and starving... and he starts to think of the comforts of home. *Can I go back?* he must wonder. *Even if I can’t be welcomed back as a son, perhaps I can be hired on as a servant.* So he has a whole plan, a whole speech prepared. As he rehearses his words, it’s hard to tell whether he’s truly remorseful or just plain calculating... but either way, he returns to his childhood home, prepared to beg for a job.

It never gets that far, though. As he approaches the house, his father sees him far off in the distance, and is filled with compassion. He runs to him, embraces him, and... well... throws a party to celebrate. “This son of mine was dead and is alive again,” the father exclaims. “He was lost and is found!” (Luke 15:24, NRSV). In this chapter, all of Jesus’ stories end with a party.

That in itself is compelling. A party? That sounds awfully nice. It’s been so long since we’ve been able to gather our friends and neighbors together for anything that looks remotely like a party... but let’s not get distracted by the party in this story. This sermon series isn’t about parties. It’s about distance. Where’s the distance in this story? We find it

just a few verses earlier: “So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion” (Luke 15:20, NRSV). *While he was still far off*. The father is filled with compassion, and begins to respond out of that compassion, even while the younger son is still far away, still far off, still distant.

While he was still far off. That right there, that verse is why I originally chose this story for this sermon series. I was struck, I think, by the way the father’s physical distance from the son didn’t get in the way of the father’s compassion for the son. Compassion isn’t diminished by distance -- or at least, it doesn’t have to be. And that’ll preach. There’s a sermon in there, a sermon about what it means for us to be moved to compassion for others, to meet the needs of others, to see the very value and humanity of others, even while we’re still separated by distance. There’s a sermon in there, especially for this season of social distancing, this season of covid-tide.

But that (it turns out) is not necessarily the sermon I’m preaching today. Why? Because this isn’t a story about the distance between a father and his son. This is a story about the distance between a father and *both* of his sons. Our focus thus far has been on the literal distance between the father and his younger son -- “while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion” -- but all the while, there’s a whole other kind of distance growing between the father and the elder son, too (Luke 15:20, NRSV).

It’s easy to overlook that. It’s easy to overlook the elder son altogether. Just think about the way we title this story: “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” That’s how we talk about the story, as if it didn’t start with the words, “There was a man who had *two* sons” (Luke 15:11, NRSV, emphasis mine).¹ We might be inclined to read up to verse 24, to end with the party and the rejoicing and the once-lost-now-found words that ring of “Amazing

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, “‘Prodigal son’ forces reassessment of Bible’s other brother pairs,” in *The Chataquan Daily*, August 11, 2011, <https://chqdaily.wordpress.com/2011/08/18/levine-%E2%80%98prodigal-son%E2%80%99-forces-reassessment-of-bible%E2%80%99s-other-brother-pairs/>.

Grace"... but the story continues. The story continues with the son we tend to overlook. The story continues with the son the *father* seems to overlook.

You hear it in the elder son's own words. It seems he has felt overlooked and undervalued for some time. "Listen!" he says when the father goes out to welcome him to his little brother's homecoming celebration. "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (Luke 15:29-30, NRSV). Whew. Wonder how long big brother has been holding that one in.

What comes next in the story? An awkward silence? A father's dawning realization of the distance that has grown between them? Maybe some raised hackles? Or perhaps a little dose of *How-dare-you-speak-to-me-in-that-tone-I'll-do-whatever-I-want-with-my-own-fatted-calves,-young-man?* No. Just as the father responds with compassion for the son who was still far off, so also the father responds with compassion for the son who is near: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours," he says (Luke 15:31, NRSV). That's moving. By the end of the story, I can't necessarily say that this family has been transformed into an ancient near eastern version of the Waltons... but they've made some steps. They've made some steps toward wholeness, thanks in no small part to the father's compassion: compassion for the prodigal son who was far off, and (somewhat belated) compassion for the overlooked son who was near.

We tend to call this "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Some more modern translators have taken to calling it "The Parable of the Lost Son" or "The Parable of the Prodigal Son and His Brother." I even heard one scholar refer to it as "The Parable of the Inept Father," because the father indulges one son and overlooks the other and ends up

becoming distant from them both. As a parent, I find that language a little harsh... but the point is well-taken. Even as we focus on responding with compassion to those who may be physically (and these days, socially) distant from us... how can we keep from repeating the father's oversight? How can we keep from overlooking those who are near to us, too?

This is a season marked by distance. We have been so distant, for so long, from so many people. As God's people -- people who have known God's compassionate love and God's empowering Spirit -- it's essential that we don't allow that distance to diminish our awareness of the needs of others, to diminish our response to the needs of others, to diminish our compassion for the needs of others. It's important that we don't allow social distancing to rob us of our compassion for others. Even while others are "far off," we should allow ourselves to be moved by the Spirit and filled with compassion.

And there are ways to do that, of course. There are ways to continue to meet the needs of others, even from a distance. It's what the Spirit has been moving us to do all throughout this pandemic. It's what we do when we make donations to the food pantry or drop off donated produce from our gardens. It's what we do when we make financial donations or send cards or make phone calls or offer services. It's what we did this very weekend, with our annual Backpack program re-imagined as a curbside pickup service. It's what we've been doing in our church ministries, and it's what we've been doing in our individual lives and relationships, too. (I, for one, have been sending virtual Dunkin' gift cards to a friend whose job has pretty much imploded into endless overtime during these COVID-touched months. Did you know you can *text* Dunkin' gift cards? I'm telling you, friends, iced coffee is my love language. This pastor runs on Dunkin'.) Distance -- even social distance -- doesn't have to diminish our compassion. We can act with compassion towards others, even when those others are still "far off."

Yet even while we focus with compassionate eyes on those who are more distant from us, let's not overlook those who are nearest to us. I know it sounds counterintuitive -- *How can we overlook them? They're right here!* -- but you'd be surprised how often that happens. You'd be surprised how often the parable father's oversight is our own. So let's be intentional. Let's not overlook those who are in our own circles or neighborhoods or even households. Let's not overlook their hearts and spirits. Let's not overlook their needs and struggles. Let's allow the Spirit to work within us, that we may respond to *them* with compassion, too.

On that note: I should grab Keith an iced coffee on the way home. Show him that I'm thinking of him, that I care about him, that I see him, that I'm not overlooking him. Iced coffee it is. Of course, it's not actually about iced coffee, right? It's about all the small ways that compassion can manifest itself in our relationships, all the small things that can help others feel our care and attention and compassion, all the small things that prevent that whole other kind of distance from cropping up in our lives... especially during a high-stress season like this.

So this week -- a week that promises to be just as distant as the last -- how can you tend not only to the needs of those who are distant from you, but also to the hearts and spirits of those nearest to you, those you might take for granted, those you might (strangely enough) overlook? How can you become more aware of *their* needs and struggles? How can you show them you're aware? And how can you be guided by God's compassion, and led by God's Spirit, to respond with compassion to those who are right close by?