

March 31, 2019 – 4th Sunday in Lent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Location, Location, Location

These last two Sundays during Education Hour we had special guest speakers lead conversations on women and justice and race and ethics. The speakers emphasized the significance of social location. Social location meaning that where you are, and who you are, significantly impacts understandings of a situation and its ethical implications.

Social location impacts understandings of today's gospel reading, says New Testament professor Mark Allen Powell in his book, *What Do They Hear?*¹ to which this sermon is indebted. Powell writes how he was teaching a group of students at a Lutheran seminary in Ohio, and he led an exercise in which they all read this parable and then he asked them to retell it in their own words. Most of the students said something like this: "A younger son asked his father for his inheritance, ahead of time, and then he squandered it. He was broke, and hungry. He decided to return home, where his father welcomed him...."

There's nothing incorrect in this summary. It follows a trajectory that is almost a trope in this country: the rags to riches story—though in the case of the parable there's an additional, prior step: riches to rags to riches. The students' summary also has an emphasis on the individual, and an accent on immorality—also very American. But the summary is also missing some detail. We could focus on any number of details in this endlessly fascinating parable, but in the case of Powell's exercise, he found it interesting how many students left out the very same detail. In one hundred student summaries, only six mentioned the famine. Did you remember the part about the famine? It's there, in the parable, it says that after the son "had spent everything, a severe famine took place." Powell was curious that so many of his students mentioned squandering—one hundred percent of them included squandering—but so few of them mentioned the famine, even though it's only after the famine hits that the parable says "the son began to be in need."

Not long after doing this exercise in Ohio, Powell went on a sabbatical in Eastern Europe. This was in 2001. While in St. Petersburg, Powell did a similar exercise with a group of Russian students. Eighty-four percent of them mentioned the famine. Powell remarks, "one doesn't need to look too far for a social or psychological explanation. In 1941 the German army laid siege to St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), and subjected its inhabitants to what was in effect a 900-day famine." One fourth of the population died of starvation and exposure. When Powell led the parable exercise, some survivors of the siege would still be around. Moreover, the collective memory continues, permeating the culture. We could mention, too, the famine that ravaged the Soviet Union in 1932-33, a famine that may have killed between 2 and 10 million people, a famine which may have been orchestrated by the state. Powell was intrigued, too, that when the Russians retold the parable, only a third of them mentioned squandering. Powell told the Russians how the American retellings differed, but the Russians weren't surprised. They said, "how revealing it is that Americans think the great sin is wasting money." How capitalist.

Powell had yet another opportunity to discuss the parable in yet another location, in East Africa, in Tanzania. In that case Powell had to alter the format of the exercise a little, he read the

¹ Powell, Mark Allen. "Social Location: A matter of Perspective," *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit & Pew*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2007.

parable aloud to a group of 50 Tanzanian seminarians, and then asked them, “Why does the young man end up starving in the pig pen?” He was curious how many would answer, “because he wasted his money” and how many would say, “because there was a famine.” A few wrote those responses, Powell said, but the vast majority, around eighty percent, wrote something else: “because no one gave him anything to eat.” That’s in the parable, too, after the squandering and the famine, it also says, “no one gave him anything.” For the Tanzanians that was key to understanding the story. They said, “The son was in a far country. Immigrants often lose their money. People think they are fools because they don’t know how things work, but the Bible commands us to care for the stranger and the alien. It is a lack of hospitality not to do so.”

What was the cause of the younger son’s trouble? How did he come to be in a such a tough place, a place of abject degradation, in a pig sty, envying animal slop? What is because of personal moral failure? Or, was it due to sweeping forces in his environment, systems bigger and beyond simply him? Or, was it because of the callousness of other people, a society without compassion or engagement with the least of these? Yes, yes, yes. The parable says all of these are answers to “What was the cause of the trouble?” All of these are answers to “What is sin?” Individual wrong-doing. Impersonal systems in which we are implicated. Communal apathy and lack of cooperative action. Location, location, location. Who we are and where we are may lead us to emphasize one element of sin more than another—we should be mindful of this, and mindful of the locations of others, of the understandings they offer, which tell a fuller story.

And we should be mindful of the location of the father, in this parable. You remember where the father was, and how he was moved? The father gives the younger son his inheritance, and the son goes away, and then it says the father saw the younger son returning “while the son was still a far way off.” This detail of distance tells us something: the father must have been looking for that son, must have been scanning the horizon, regularly, anxiously, intensely, hopefully, ever since the day the son left. How else could the father see the son, while he was still at a distance, unless the father had been looking for that son, every single day? On the day the father finally saw the son the father dropped all pretense of propriety, he crossed the threshold of his home and ran to meet his son, and embrace him, kiss him, the one who was lost, now found. This is where we locate God in the parable: in the father who has been looking for us, always looking for us, however we are lost, in all the ways we are lost. We locate God as the one who crosses the threshold for us. In Christ God crosses the distance to us, to welcome us home.

I could stop right there, but the parable doesn’t. There is yet one more character to locate, another, older son, of whom we should also be mindful. The joyous party for the lost son was well underway, but someone was missing from it: his older brother. The father went outside to meet this son, too. The father crosses the threshold to call to that son, too, to plead with him, “Come in. Come home.” The older son refuses.

Every time I read this part of the story I am convicted. How well it encapsulates yet another aspect of sin, an aspect which feels all too close: how it is possible to be in a state of grace—and not be there; how it is possible to be offered all the father has—but have none of it; how it is possible to be given life, love, work, house, music, dancing, the opportunity for reconciliation, it is possible to be given all of this, to have been given it from the beginning—but instead relocate oneself in resentment, self-righteousness, and solitude.

Did the older son stay there, outside, in self-exile while on the very grounds of grace? We don’t know. That’s where the parable ends. We must write this story’s ending, for ourselves.