

June 30, 2019
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Luke 15
“Red Letter Jesus”

Who do you say that I am?

Today is the last Sunday we focus on this theme, based on Jesus’ questions to his disciples — “But who do YOU say that I am?”

The image on the bulletin cover today is a visual reflection I made on this question at the morning retreat we had here a few weeks ago. The women in the collage are from an icon of The Myrrh-Bearers, the women who came to consecrate Jesus’ dead body only to find no body there at all.

For me, there is power in this image of showing up, expecting to find the body of Christ dead, and instead finding the tomb empty. The mysterious affirmation that the body of Christ is not dead: neither the body of the man who lived, nor the collective body of those who follow him call ourselves by his name. I am comforted and challenged by the reminder that Jesus was not captured on the cross, or in a tomb, nor can Christ be contained in a book or in a theological tradition, either much less any one sermon or reflection.

It’s a humbling reminder that Jesus never told the disciples, “when I’m gone, go to Temple, you’ll find me there, in the words and rituals of the priest.” He said he’d be found in the gathering of people, and in the places where hands are meeting needs, where “the least of these” are. It means that even when we show up and find the place we last found him empty, he’s not dead or non-existent, but rather simply *out and about*.

I chose the story of Luke 15 for today because it’s one of the most formative passages for me in helping me identify who *I* Say Jesus is. I found an interesting set of reflections on Luke 15 by the late Kenneth E. Bailey, a theologian and founder of the Institute for Middle Eastern New Testament Studies. Having lived much of his childhood and adult years in Egypt, he was very interested in reading the New Testament through Middle Eastern cultural understandings.

He found Luke 15 interesting enough that he wrote an entire book on that passage alone. One of the things he emphasized was that the set up of this story would have set off alarm bells for contemporary readers that we might not catch.

First of all, the very premise of the story is absolutely scandalous. Inheritance was simply not supposed to be settled until and unless a father was on his death-bed. So, for a son to request to receive his inheritance while his father was alive and well, was a great insult to his family. To make matters worse, his intention was to *sell* his portion of the inheritance. This would be like the son of a farmer asking to sell half of his father’s land *out from under him*, while his father was still farming it.

And adding even more drama, the story goes to great lengths to emphasize that not only does this son lose his fortune, but he loses it to Gentiles, which the comment about the pigs apparently clues us in to: because Jews would not likely raise pigs. So the inheritance is not just lost to the family, but to the community, as well.

"From the Jerusalem Talmud it is known that the Jews of the time of Jesus had a method of punishing any Jewish boy who lost the family inheritance to Gentiles. It was called the "qetsatsah [ket-saht-sah] ceremony." Horror at such a loss is also reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Such a violator of community expectations would face the qetsatsah ceremony if he dared to return to his home village.

The ceremony was simple. The villagers would bring a large earthenware jar, fill it with burned nuts and burned corn, and break it in front of the guilty individual. While doing this, the community would shout, "So-and-so is cut off from his people." From that point on, the village would have nothing to do with the wayward lad."
Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15*. <http://donna-connections.blogspot.com/2011/04/pursuing-father-part-1.html>

Bailey emphasizes that the prodigal son's actions can be read in this light: his attempts to get back his money by taking jobs, and, that failing, his intention to return to his father and ask to be hired by him seem to reflect the son's knowledge that he would no longer be a son when he returned — his assumption that a *qetsatsah* would happen when he returned. Thus his focus on earning money to restore the lost inheritance, which would be required in order to be accepted and restored to the community and the family.

What Bailey also makes clear is that the father in this story seems to be keeping this *qetsatsah* very much in mind, as well. The father in this story is said to see his son from far off, and to go *running* to him. "If the father can get to the son before the village does, then he can save his son from being cut off. He can save his relationship with his son and his family's relationship with the village all at the same time."

Here is another detail underlining how unusual this reunion is: patriarchs are not supposed to run. Robes, in specific, are not items of clothing a man could run in and maintain his dignity. What would be expected in such a situation would be for the *mother* to run out to the son, while the father would wait to be greeted in his tent. But this father, "the Pursuing Father," as Bailey calls him, picks up his skirts and "runs like a girl," determined to get to his son before anyone else does. "This reconciliation will cost him his honor—his greatness in others' eyes—but that is a price he is willing to pay." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family," March 18, 2007, <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/031807.html>)

I'm not sure I can even describe how moving I find this image, or how very much the father in this story is my answer to the question of who I say Jesus is. A male-identified human who unapologetically, enthusiastically, embodied feminine qualities, *even when* it would be looked down on by the community. A God who takes on the roles assigned to the lower-downs, even if society hasn't caught up to that or blessed it. A God who embodies demonstrative, tender male love.

These aren't Bailey's words, but the Jesus I see here has either got some Queer going' on, or is quite happy to be mistaken for it, either of which is awesome. And this Jesus, this God-with-us, is NOT ABOUT to let his son be shunned. He is not waiting for community approval.

It's why he says, "Quickly, let's throw a feast!" he can't get this party started fast enough, because he has to prevent the inevitable—*lawful*, I might

add—ax of community coming down on his son. This isn't just a father who's besottedly biased toward his son; this is a father who is strategically working to protect his son and who wants to be publicly identified with this "prodigal" son the the should be shunning.

He has been looking down the road, all this time, waiting for the moment, which he knew would turn on a dime, when he must be ready to run to his son.

I love how this story turns the clobber text of John 14:6 upside down. "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the father but by me." That's usually quoted as if it's *obviously* about exclusion. But really, the joke is that it's like saying, in your most threatening voice, "no one gets into this house, except through the golden retriever at the front door!" Which basically means, no one comes to God without being EXUBERANTLY, EXQUISITELY, GUILLESSLY, PURPOSEFULLY WELCOMED. There WILL be great rejoicing for you! I'm putting my foot down.

So, in that vein, I'd like to ask ushers to help me out at this time by passing out a red pen to everyone.

You have surely noticed that we've printed today's scriptures in the tradition of red letter editions of the New Testament. This tradition began in the very late 1800s, on the whim of a journalist named Louis Klopsch, who was inspired by the line from the last supper where Jesus says: "This is the new covenant in my blood." It turned out to be a very popular way of printing New Testaments. It was helpful in the King James translation, especially, because the KJV didn't use quotation marks, so readers could much more easily decipher Jesus' words.

Even though most of us don't use red letter editions, it's become a common shorthand or metaphorical way of speaking of Jesus' words: the "red letters."

I invite you to receive your red pen as a provocation or prompt:

1. to remember the words of Jesus; to spend time reading them and pondering them, and to remind you of the question Jesus' asked those who followed him: "But who do *you* say that I am?" Your answer(s) to that question matter. It's a lot easier to answer Jesus' first question: "Who do *THEY* say that I am?" And to find faults in others' descriptions. It's much harder to articulate one's own claims about faith. And, like it or not, as a participant in a Christian congregation, you *are* a part of a greater interpretive community that's shaping how these red letters are lived out in the world — so I hope this pen reminds you and inspires you to *participate actively* in that collective interpretation.
2. red pens hold the contradictory image of John 14:6. "I am the way, the truth and the life." Red pens are known as instruments of *correction*. Red ink from a teacher usually means a mistake or a wrong answer. But how does Jesus Christ, the Teacher, correct us? May this red pen remind you of the Pursuing Father who runs to greet you, tripping on his robes, determined to reach you before mob does. And the ferocious Golden Retriever who guards the pathway to your way home.
3. the red pen is a reminder of the red letter Bibles, which were just a publishing

gimmick, but they have shaped how we read scripture. That publisher chose to highlight Jesus' words, set them apart, give them different weight. So, too, I invite you to consider the color of the words you allow to shape your life. The "prodigal son" was living his life in fear of the words of his home town — in fear of the *qetsatsah* ceremony they were sure to hold. But the red letters of Jesus, God-with-us, got to him first, *ran to him*, to get there before the red-correcting-pen of community could make a single mark. If you find yourself speaking harshly to yourself, consider editing the inner critic's red ink with what the red letters of the Pursuing Father might be for you.

4. and finally, while red is certainly not the whole rainbow, may its splash of color be a reminder of the delightful queerness of God the Father, running to greet you, skirts-a-flying, as only a mother was allowed to do in that time. And then throwing a dance party afterward, because OF COURSE HE DID!

May we so accept our belatedness and foundness, that we can reach out with just as great love to those on our borders — whether they be the borders of our lives, the borders of our communities, or the borders of our nation. Amen.