

Lent IV - From Exceptionalism to Inclusion *start screen sharing [SLIDE 1]

A Sermon Preached by Zac Klassen on March 27th, 2022 at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church

Over the last three Sundays of Lent, we have been “seeking God’s ways” as we have followed Jesus through the wilderness of temptation and through the Galilean countryside, watching as he healed and taught the crowds along the winding way to Jerusalem. Throughout our journeys with Jesus, we have begun to have *our ways* of doing things challenged. On our journey with Jesus in the desert, we were challenged to resist the many ways that we are tempted to **take control** and **secure** our lives against uncertainty and danger, even at the cost of others. In resisting that temptation, we were called to trust that God would be with us as we walk in the way of **generously sharing** God’s abundant love with those around us. On our journey with Jesus in the Galilean countryside, we were challenged to give up our **fear** of the fox—of violent worldly powers—to stand up to those powers instead of letting our lives and our desires be shaped by their violent ways. In standing up to the powers, we were called to have our desires transformed so that we would long to be gathered to God, our mother hen, and follow God’s way in living out Jesus’ ministry of **compassion** in our community. Last week, we sat and listened to Jesus as he taught his disciples a parable about a fig tree. That parable helped them give up the idea that God’s love, commitment, and care for us is dependent on our **earning** that love through doing all the right things. In turn, we learned that even when we fail to produce fruit, God the patient gardener works to nourish our roots with the rich food of abundant love that we are called to open ourselves to **receive**. In receiving God’s abundant love, we learned that we will also be enabled to produce fruit.

Today, as we continue to seek God’s ways by following Jesus and listening to him as he teaches the crowds, we hear again another parable that he told them, a familiar parable about a

man and his two sons. Through exploring this parable today, we will be challenged to discover that God's ways go against the grain of our human tendencies to see the world through the lens of exceptionalism, a lens by which we value and count some people as more important than others. We will then hear God's call to move from our perceiving the world through this exceptionalist lens, to a more inclusive love that welcomes and embraces everyone.

Before we look at the parable from Luke 15 in detail, however, I thought it might be helpful to spend a bit of time with this word "exceptionalism" [SLIDE 2] that our worship materials have suggested we use. What is this word all about? Maybe we can understand the word better by considering the more familiar word "exceptional": something that is "exceptional" stands apart from all the rest, is superior or better than that which it is being compared to. And so, maybe we might say: "Ralph Weber's lawn care is exceptional, especially when compared with Zac Klassen's!" If we use this definition or something like it and add the "ism" to it, we get something like "a manner of behavior that sets one or some apart from all others, that views some as more superior or better than others."

Perhaps some of us might have heard the word "exceptionalism" used in the context of certain views about national identity: for example, there are some views of one's national identity, be it Canadian or American or any other nation, that views that identity as somehow "exceptional," set apart from all the rest and even *better* than all the rest. And so, you might hear someone in political studies talk, usually negatively, about "American exceptionalism" as the belief that America has a divine destiny through history to be a "Christian nation" and spread 'peace' throughout the world, or you might hear someone talk about "Canadian exceptionalism" as the belief that Canada is, in stark contrast to other more backward countries, a place where human rights are always honored, and that all peoples are welcome to come and live in peace and

prosperity. Of course, many “exceptionalisms” begin with a positive element of truth to them, something even admirable, but then over-generalize that truth to such an extent that it becomes a kind of ideology that blinds us to the ways that we fail to live up to those supposed ‘exceptional’ aspects to our identity—and even use that over-generalization to ignore our need to do better.

Beyond the national level, I think we can all think of ways that “exceptionalism” becomes a problem in other contexts as well. If we all took time to think about it, we could all, I’m sure, identify ways that we have seen forms of “workplace exceptionalism,” “religious exceptionalism,” “gender” and “sex” exceptionalism,” and the list could go on. The problem with *any* kind of exceptionalism is that it fosters in us, whether as individuals or as communities, a superiority complex that is dangerous precisely because it has become so embedded in the ways that we see the world that we cannot even recognize that it is there. When we see through an exceptionalist lens, we tend to move around the world playing our own “noisy gong or clanging cymbal,” to borrow words from St. Paul. In doing so we take less time to listen to, discern, and *count* the concerns, wisdom, and gifts of others in this wide web of all our relations in the world. When we move around the world in this noisy, exceptionalist way, we see everyone through a “human point of view” (2 Cor. 5:16), and we forsake what in his first letter to the Corinthians St. Paul called “a more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). The more excellent way, for Paul, is God’s way, namely, the way of patient, kind, truthful, and inclusive love (cf. all of 1 Cor. 12 & 13), where the gifts of all enrich the whole body. But what are we to do when we have become so blinded because of our own “exceptionalist lens,” our own human point of view, that we cannot even recognize it for what it is? In such times we need wise teachers to come and give us new eyes to see what we have been blinded to—to see with the eyes of new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

[SLIDE 3] This brings us back to our parable today from Luke 15, the parable of the man and his two sons. How, we might wonder, does this parable draw us into the problem of exceptionalism and how might it also teach us to move beyond exceptionalism to the way of God's inclusive love? Perhaps we might begin by considering how the typical interpretation of this parable draws us into the problem of exceptionalism and helps us see the better way of God's inclusive love. [SLIDE 4] This parable has often been called "the parable of the prodigal son" and people have called it that because it has been interpreted as a powerful image of a young son who disgraced his father, left home to spend his life in wasteful and reckless ways, only to later return to his loving Father who embraced him and showered him with mercy and love. The focus of the story, implied by the title, then, is that it is a story of a sinner who was lost, who repented, and who was found, who received mercy and forgiveness. Of course, this is not just a parable about the "prodigal" son, however, for there is an older brother too. In the typical interpretation of this parable, the older brother has been seen as an image of our human resistance to and resentment of God's mercy and love being extended to those who we feel are undeserving.

There are good reasons that this parable has been interpreted as the "parable of the prodigal son." After all, as Luke's gospel presents the matter, Jesus spoke this and two other parables as a way of responding to the grumbling of the Pharisees and the scribes who were not happy that Jesus welcomed sinners and included them in his fellowship by eating and drinking with them (Luke 15:1-2). Understandably, then, Christians have interpreted this parable throughout the ages as Jesus' way of challenging the apparent "exceptionalist identity" of those Pharisees and the Scribes, of showing them how God's love does not extend only to those who

are righteous but also to sinners, to “the lost.”¹ [SLIDE 5] In the parable of the man and his two sons, this interpretation sees “God” in the figure of the Father who has two sons, sees “the tax collectors and sinners” as the younger brother, and sees the Pharisees and the Scribes as the “older brother” who is angry that the Father welcomes the prodigal son back so graciously, even throwing him a party while the older Son had faithfully been serving the Father all these years and *never* received such a feast in *his* honour.² The older brother, in this reading, resents the father for showing this love to the younger brother and so too, goes this interpretation, did the Scribes and Pharisees resent Jesus for extending God’s love to tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, on the other hand, tries to teach them that God rejoices at finding the lost, repentant child, just as in his earlier parables, the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, Jesus had said that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents than 99 who need no repentance (15:7).

[SLIDE 6] This typical interpretation encouraged by Luke is no doubt powerful and continues to offer rich spiritual resources for followers of Jesus who seek to live a life of repentance, humility, and inclusion for those who have been alienated from God and from each other. After all, we can see ourselves in the wayward child who mistakenly looks for happiness in the wrong places and who has become aware of our neediness. We can rejoice that God welcomes us home with joy in spite of our mistakes. We can also see ourselves in the older brother, resentful of the way that God shows mercy to those we may look down on as less than or

¹ Many modern Jewish commentators quickly point out that the view that God’s love was only for the righteous was clearly not the common Jewish understanding and that plenty of Jews, including Pharisees and Scribes, would have understood God to be a God of mercy and welcome (as God is often portrayed throughout the Hebrew bible). As I understand it, the interpretation of early church fathers was consistently along the lines of the negative view of the Jewish leaders I have been describing above, but with the added emphasis on the identity of the sinner (Gentile Christians) and the identity of the older brother (Jews).

² As biblical scholar Francois Bovon has pointed out, the Older Son’s use of the word “never” is later contrasted by the Father’s use of the word “always.” See p.61 in *Exegesis: Problems of Method and Exercises in Reading (Genesis 22 and Luke 15)*

as undeserving. We can rejoice in discovering that God’s love has always been ours, but that it cannot *only* be ours—that it must be shared extravagantly.

Having recognized the obvious value of this typical interpretation, however, I wonder if it has also become so familiar to us that we have become blind to other ways we might interpret it. Furthermore, I wonder if we have missed the ways that this parable has also been used against itself to, ironically, prop up attitudes of exceptionalism that we are called to reject. For example, historically this parable, among several others New Testament texts, has been used by Christians to paint the Pharisees and Scribes in as bad a light as possible. Too much of Christian history has taken the inter-familial debates and discussions between Jesus and his Jewish brothers and used them to make the Pharisees and Scribes into a negative foil or stereotype of self-righteousness and legalism against which the Gospel of God’s free mercy could be told. Take, for example, a common children’s song that we all know which begins with reference to a sheep, just as one of Jesus’ parables in Luke 15 also begins with a sheep, and a lost one at that:

I Just want to Be a Sheep, Baa, Baa, Baa, Baa → But, what comes next?...
I Don't wanna be a Pharisee
I Don't wanna be a Pharisee
'Cause they're not fair you see
I Don't wanna be a Pharisee

Now, most of the time when Christians sing this song, they do so with no ill intent to Jewish people in the present. They simply do so with a desire to take what the biblical text says and work with it for Christian education. But, when you consider that we have just begun speaking about what it would take to move beyond an “exceptionalist identity” where we define ourselves as superior over against others, and then you sing a song that sets up a contrast between Pharisees and Sheep, with the sheep clearly being the superior character and the Jewish Pharisee being looked down on, the song begins to sound a bit ironic, doesn’t it? A song that is

intended to call kids to be fair and not exclude others is being used to unfairly over-generalize the attitudes of those who were important teachers in the Jewish community in Jesus' day. We do well, in this context, to remember St. Paul's strong warning to the Gentile Christians in his letter to the Romans, not to use the mercy shown to us Gentiles as an occasion to "boast" over Jews (Romans 11:18).

While many of the gospels do indeed show Jesus sparring with the Scribes and the Pharisees, there is also so much we do not know about Jesus' relationship with them. More recently, scholars have presented strong evidence to demonstrate that Jesus was likely very close in his understanding of scripture and the following of the law to that of the Pharisees he talked with. This means that many if not most of his arguments with them were inter-familial arguments—debates within a common faith—and certainly not arguments between two different religions as it came to be understood by many throughout history. Jesus was a Jew who cared deeply about the law and so debated and discussed often with his fellow Jewish teachers. This is what he was doing, we must also think, when he told them this parable about a man and his two sons.

Beyond the ways that our familiarity with this parable might lead us to be blind to how it has been used against itself to exclude, our familiarity with it might also prevent us from hearing Jesus' parables as provocative stories with many other possible interpretations – something that can hardly happen if we think we already know their meaning.³ We really shouldn't know in advance what the "moral" of the story is or "who represents who" in the parable, because the whole point of parables is that they meet us in the very concrete reality that we live in and serve to shock us into the realization that *we*, not others, have been blind to God's ways! So, what

³ In fact, many of Jesus' parables offer no "explanation" but require interpretation.

would happen if we heard this parable with new ears? What other interpretations are possible? There is no one answer to this question since, as I said before, parables are meant to challenge us in our concrete context and provoke us to learn something that we have been blinded to. That means that there are likely 30-50 different interpretations for this parable sitting in this room and on zoom right now and I look forward to hearing some of those in our worship response time. To further expand our imagination about how these parables could possibly be interpreted differently than the typical interpretation, however, I want to offer you two less common readings of this parable from some more recent interpreters. I think both interpretations help us see perhaps just as well as the traditional interpretation, how God is calling us to move from exceptionalism to inclusion in our community.

The first alternate interpretation of this parable comes from the Swiss German theologian Karl Barth.⁴ [SLIDE 7] Barth uses the parable from Luke 15 as an image of God's reconciling love for all creation expressed in the sending of his son into the world to redeem it. For Barth, *Jesus is the son* who leaves the Father's side in becoming a human being, he is the way of God "going into the far country" of our world, radically embracing it in the depths of its lostness, judging it by judging himself in it, and raising it to new life by being himself raised from the lostness of death. When Jesus returns to the Father, Barth says that Jesus brings not only himself back to God but draws us with him back to God, where we find ourselves, in our full humanity, embraced and exalted by God's mercy, clothed in new life, and seated at a rich feast. To quote Barth:

"It was God who went into the far country, and it is the human creature who returns home. Both took place in the one Jesus Christ."⁵

⁴ Admittedly, Barth also had a problem with caricaturing Jews and Judaism, even as he also, practically speaking, did a lot to support Jews and speak out against anti-Semitism during the eras before and after WWII.

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, p.21, language of "man" changed to "human creature" in quote.

This is, of course, a creative interpretation of the parable that does not seek to stay strictly with Luke's reading and neither does it account for every detail of the parable. But Barth's reading nonetheless wonderfully engages the parable, allowing the images to run their course through the whole story of scripture and especially the New Testament. In addition, this interpretation brings into relief our theme for today regarding God's way of "inclusive love." By going into the "far country" of our lostness, Jesus showed us that God is not a God who stays aloft from us, in holy superiority, but that God is humble and self-giving. To paraphrase a verse from Paul, drawing it into our theme for today: [SLIDE 8]

Philippians 2:6 though Jesus was in the form of God, he did not take the way of divine exceptionalism, but emptied himself," and through that emptying, he became included in our life, and we became included in his life.

If God does not stand aloft from us in holy superiority, neither can we, called to be imitators of God, do so when relating to others in our human family.

If this first alternate reading of the parable focuses on a creative interpretation of the relationship between the Father and the younger son, the second alternate reading of this parable that I offer you this morning focuses more on the relationship between the Father and the older son. This reading comes from a renowned Jewish scholar of the New Testament, Amy-Jill Levine. [SLIDE 9] In addition to writing a book on the parables of Jesus, Levine has also co-written a wonderful children's book on the three parables from Luke 15 that frames them with the question: "Who Counts?" which is the title of the book.⁶ According to Levine, the three parables that Jesus tells in Luke 15—the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the man and his two sons—should be read together as all concerned with "counting, searching for what is missing,

⁶ Levine co-wrote this book with Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. Levine has spoken in numerous other contexts about these parables as being about "counting." The book was published in 2017 by Westminster John Knox Press.

and celebrating becoming whole again.”⁷ While Luke 15 has typically been read as emphasizing the younger son’s repentance and the Father’s mercy, Levine sees more going on.

One of the key elements to the parable of the man and his two sons that Levine draws out so wonderfully in the book is the family dynamic at play between the Father and his sons, especially between the Father and the older son. [SLIDE 10] The Hebrew scriptures are, of course, full of stories of family conflict and, wouldn’t you know it, that conflict often happens between younger and older siblings (and yes, it is just a coincidence that my older siblings are here today)! So how would reading the parable through the considerations of family relationships change our reading? Well, have you ever wondered, as you read this parable, why the party celebrating the younger son’s return had started and was going on in full force while the older Son had not even been invited to join in or had not even been told about his brother’s return? Drawing the central theme of “counting” that is present in Jesus’ parables of the lost sheep and the last coin into the parable of the man and his two son’s, Levine’s children’s story powerfully depicts a moment at the party [SLIDE 11] when the Father “counts” everyone and realizes that he has forgotten the older son. When he runs out of the house to find him, [SLIDE 12] he encounters the older Son visibly upset at being forgotten, which only heightens his negative impression of his wayward brother. Eventually, the father thinks: [SLIDE 13] “I have two sons—one, two. I paid attention to my younger son, but I discounted my older son. I didn’t realize that he felt lost.” He then invites his older son to come celebrate and says to him, [SLIDE 14] “Without you...something is missing. With you, our family is complete.”

Levine’s reading of the parable, you might say, causes us to ask about who counts in a family on at least two levels. [SLIDE 15] On one level, we might ask: “who is doing the

⁷ From “A Note to Parents and Teachers” at the back of the book

counting?” or “who has power in a family and are they counting everyone so that all are cared for?” On another level we might ask, who counts in a family in the sense of “who is treated as valuable in a family?” All of us, I’m sure, can recognize ourselves or our families in the dynamics of this type of story. All of us can think of times when we have felt left out, where we did not feel “counted” or included. Perhaps more difficult for us to admit are those times too when we have been the ones in the position of “counting” and we have left others out, failing to count them. Wholeness in a family, be it in an immediate family or a church family, occurs when everyone can feel counted. Levine’s interpretation surprises us [SLIDE 16] by inviting us to read Luke’s parable from the perspective of the “Parent figure” who has also made a mistake and who now needs to ask themselves, “Have I lost something, or someone, and not paid attention? Is there someone I have taken for granted? What, or whom, have I forgotten to count?”⁸ These questions, of course, can be turned to us as a church community too: “Have we lost something, or someone, and not paid attention? Is there someone we take for granted? What, or whom, have we forgotten to count?” [SLIDE 17] *stop screen sharing

This lent, God is inviting us to move from exceptionalism to inclusion by being shaped into a people who walk in the humble way of Jesus; called to move outside of ourselves to include ourselves in the life of others in this world and the life of others in our lives. And we are called to pay close attention to who counts or who we count in our communities so that we can avoid forgetting or excluding God’s beloved children and instead walk in God’s way of extravagant welcome. In just a moment we will sing our hymn of response called “God lights a lamp.” It is a new song for us, one that is based on Jesus’ parable in Luke 15 of the woman who counts her coins only to discover that she has lost one of her coins. It provides a powerful image

⁸ These questions also come from the note at the end of the book.

of the God who does not forget to count and include everyone, as well as an image of God as a woman who seeks out the lost by shining her light into the cracks and crevices of our world. May it inspire us to walk in God's way of inclusive love. AMEN.