March 31, 2019   
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Cultivating Self-Compassion: Letting Go of Perfectionism

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 Common English Bible

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Jesus told them this parable: “A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. “When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.” ’ So he got up and went to his father. “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’ Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. He answered his father, ‘Look, I’ve served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you’ve never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’”

This is a great story not only in scripture but in all literature. The prodigal son story resonates with so many of us. I wonder if it resonates so much because it taps into our human yearning for home. It is this desire we all have to belong, to be known and loved, to be whole.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this story, the younger son wants to see more of the world, and he can’t wait for his dad to die to receive his inheritance. His dad gives his younger son his share of the family property and the younger son turns his back on his family and his home.

When he decides to return home, it is self-preservation rather than with any sense of regret for what he has done. The father doesn’t care, he runs out to embrace his son. He doesn’t care if the younger son learned his lesson or if he is ready to change. He is simply overjoyed that his son has returned. This is a story about grace, about God’s love for us. God’s love is not judgmental. God’s love makes room for mistakes. God loves us and always embraces us when we come home.

Forgiveness runs throughout this story. Forgiveness is something we all need sometimes. In our own ways we are all broken. Out of that brokenness, we hurt ourselves and others. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts, it is how we become whole again. Forgiveness is the journey we take to get home. It’s how we turn our face toward home, toward belonging.

Brene Brown says that in order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die. Brene Brown heard that in church. Her pastor shared about counseling a couple on the brink of divorce after the wife discovered her husband was having an affair. They were both devastated at the potential end of their marriage, but the wife couldn’t forgive her husband for betraying her and the husband couldn’t forgive himself. The pastor said in order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die.[[2]](#footnote-2) If you make a choice to forgive, you have to face into the pain. You have to hurt. For forgiveness to happen, something has to die. It has to be let go of and grieved. We have to forgive on purpose, over and over, because it is the right thing.

We often gloss over the older son in this story. He is the faithful child who remained home and worked for his father while his younger brother spent everything. The older son didn’t insult his father. He worked, day after day, year after year, and his father never threw him a party. It might be easy for you to resonate with the older son’s point of view. We are at church after all! We do what needs to be done, we only want someone to acknowledge how good we are.

The older son is filled with jealousy and resentment. He seems to have a lot of pain. Had he wanted to leave home too but he felt trapped? I wonder what the older son needed to let go of in order to forgive his brother? Did he need to let go of the idea that his dad was keeping score?

We are in the season of Lent as we count down to Easter. It is this time of spiritual gardening, of inviting God to unearth in us what needs to be tended, and what needs to die for new life to emerge. We have been thinking about what we can cultivate in our lives and what we need to let go of. How can we cultivate self-compassion and let go of perfectionism in our lives?

The good news for us is that we don’t have to be perfect. We aren’t called to be perfect. We are called by God to be ourselves. We think that if we live perfect and look perfect and act perfect, then we can avoid the pain of blame, judgment and shame. Perfectionism is this shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us when it is preventing us from loving ourselves.[[3]](#footnote-3) We focus on what others will think instead of focusing on ourselves. We think that we can earn approval and acceptance. We think we are what we accomplish and how well we accomplish it.

Perfectionism is an unattainable goal because it is about perception. We want to be perceived as perfect. But, there is no way to control perception, no matter how much time and energy you spend trying.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We have to become more loving and compassionate with ourselves and begin to practice shame resilience so we can embrace our imperfections.[[5]](#footnote-5) When we can embrace our imperfections, we can find our truest gifts of courage, compassion and connection. We all have some perfectionist tendencies but we can teach ourselves to speak about our imperfections in a tender and honest way, without shame and fear. We need to insert a phrase into our daily life. “We’re all doing the best we can.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Self-compassion is about being understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or beating ourselves up with self-criticism. Each one of us suffers and feels inadequate. Perfectionism never happens in a vacuum. It touches everyone around us. We pass it down to our children. Perfectionism infects our workplaces with impossible expectations, and it is suffocating our friends and families.[[7]](#footnote-7) Compassion also spreads quickly. When we’re kind to ourselves, our children learn how to be self-compassionate by watching us and the people around us feel free to be authentic and connected.

There is a great line from a Leonard Cohen song called “Anthem”. “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” We try to spackle over our cracks, trying to make everything look just right. But there is beauty in our cracks and our messy houses and our too-tight jeans. Our imperfections are reminders that we’re all in this together, imperfectly, but together.[[8]](#footnote-8) Showing up is enough.

What keeps you from feeling at home? Do you feel like the older son, working yourself ragged and feeling resentful for all that you do? Do you have dreams that you poured yourself into that went nowhere and you feel like a failure? Have you hurt people who love you? Have people that you love hurt you? Have you acted in ways that make it hard for you to look at yourself in the mirror? Have others said things to you that make you doubt the beauty and belovedness of the person you see in the mirror? What do you need to feel and grieve and let go in order to come home?[[9]](#footnote-9)

We are not defined by what we have done, for good or for ill. We are defined by God’s love for us. We are defined by God’s decision to make peace with us and extend wholeness to us through Christ. For forgiveness to happen something has to die. Let go of resentments. Let go of old hurts. Forgive those you love. Give us the strength to run out into the road to welcome our long lost brother.

1. <https://vimeo.com/314351659?ref=fb-share&fbclid=IwAR0fOdbpcmddgVRmQscVKmleniSiCDJji25ai12kvu5kPDI_HowVt6d1aug> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://vimeo.com/314351659?ref=fb-share&fbclid=IwAR0fOdbpcmddgVRmQscVKmleniSiCDJji25ai12kvu5kPDI_HowVt6d1aug> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gifts of Imperfection. Brene Brown. P. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gifts of Imperfection. Brene Brown. P. 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gifts of Imperfection. Brene Brown. P. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gifts of Imperfection. Brene Brown. P. 56-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gifts of Imperfection. Brene Brown. P. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Gifts of Imperfection. Brene Brown. P. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://vimeo.com/314351659?ref=fb-share&fbclid=IwAR0fOdbpcmddgVRmQscVKmleniSiCDJji25ai12kvu5kPDI_HowVt6d1aug> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)