

He Came to His Own
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
December 25, 2022 AM Sermon
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John 1:9-13

I want to start with an ordinary kind of scene that plays itself out in regular families all the time. A Mother and her adult son have a difficult relationship. She feels that her son is angry with her, and she can't figure out why. It seems like he speaks to her only in short sentences and calls her only when he must. The son for his part has always felt his Mother's disapproval. It seems to him that every important choice he ever made in his life, his career, his spouse, his friendships was met by raised eyebrows and questions. The son feels as though every time she offers him a mug of affection, she manages to mix in a tablespoon of judgment. So there's tension. It's not what they want. Both of them want to be close. Both of them want a free loving, understanding relationship.

Christmas vacation comes. The family gets together and both parties are hoping that this will improve their relationship. One afternoon while they're in the middle of a conversation the Mother decides to take a risk and she reaches out to her son with a compliment. She knows her son has never been much of a home repair kind of guy, but last month he installed a new French door in the dining room. So she says, "Honey I heard you put a new door in your dining room! That's great! Good for you!" "Thanks," the son replies, smiling awkwardly but sincerely. Mom senses the awkwardness and it makes her nervous, so she does what she always does when she's nervous: she keeps talking, "I think it's so great when someone is able to fix things around the house, you can save so much money. I remember when your dad finished the whole basement for us! It was so wonderful for the family, and we could never have afforded it without his hard work. He's so good at that stuff!!!"

Silence. No more smiles. The son is clouding over. He feels like an agenda is being pushed on him. He feels judgment. 'This is not encouragement,' he thinks. 'This is a sermon disguised as a compliment. This is Mom saying, "Why can't you be more like your Dad."' "Well I guess we can't all be as awesome as Dad," says the son. "That's not what I meant. I was trying to be nice! Why are you so sensitive?" The son says, "Whatever!" and the conversation flickers out.

The exchange is over in less than a minute, but it's enough to ruin the afternoon. It's enough to make both of them feel miserable. It's enough to make them feel as if the curtain has once again been drawn between them. And for the rest of their time together at Christmas they can both feel the tension; they can feel the presence of that curtain.

There's something so familiar about that exchange I just described. Even if you've never had an exchange exactly like it, it feels like the kind of thing we've all experienced as we negotiate our relationships. We all want to connect with each other. We all want intimacy. We all want other people to see our hearts, to really know who we are. And yet as we go through our life we find out that really connecting with someone is hard. Even with the people closest to us, the people who we've known our whole life, we struggle for intimacy. We try to make a connection, but because of our insecurities and our fears we end up crashing into each other jabbing one another with our sharp edges. Even in our closest relationships, resentments build up and they are so hard to get rid of. What word do we have for that struggle to connect? What word do we have for that feeling of trying and failing to make ourselves known? We call it loneliness. When that Mother and that son walked away from that failed Christmas conversation, what would they feel? They would feel lonely.

I want to talk about loneliness at Christmas. I know that sounds depressing, but it was the gospel of John that made me do it. Verses 10 and 11 in particular. When I read what John writes there, I hear echoes of the conversations like the one between the mother and the son at the beginning of this sermon. Verses 10-11 bring to mind all our attempts to connect that end in car crashes and loneliness. "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

He came to his own, but his own did not receive him. That is a lonely sentence. Read that sentence and you see that when Jesus came to earth he shared our loneliness. In Christ, God knows and feels our loneliness. Read those two verses and you realize that there is a real sense in which we can speak of the loneliness of God.

Now, you're probably thinking that Peter has finally lost his theological marbles. God? Lonely?! How can that be!! God is perfect and holy and good! God knows no sin. God reigns in heaven where everything is

always happy! How can you say that he is lonely!?! I say it because scripture says it. There are hints of it right from the beginning.

Do you remember how Genesis 2 described the relationship between us and God? God walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of day. God walked with his people side by side and face to face in perfect ease and intimacy. Adam and Eve were naked and knew no shame that suggests complete openness and vulnerability before God. The heart of Adam was open to God; the heart of God was wide open to Adam. But then Adam and Eve sin and shame washes over them, they cover their bodies and flee from God's presence.

It leads to that amazing scene in Genesis 3 where the Lord shows up for their afternoon walk, and Adam is not there, and the Lord calls out, "Where are you?" "Adam and Eve Where are you?!" God feels the absence of his children and he calls out for them, because he wants to commune with them. That cry is the first hint of something like loneliness in the heart of God as we hide from him and push him away.

You see something similar in the prophets. Through the prophets God expresses his anger and frustration at his people because they don't listen to his voice. Because they don't turn towards him.

In Hosea 11 he compares his relationship to his people with the relationship between a Father and a wayward, rebellious son. And in that passage the Father starts with real anger toward his son, "a sword will flash in their cities and put an end to their plans!" But then underneath that anger he expresses a deep longing just to be with him again. "It was I who taught Israel to walk. I used to put my face against his cheek. All my compassion is aroused! I will get my son and bring him home." The passage expresses a deep longing of the Father for a relationship with his children.

Or listen to these words of Jeremiah 31:20: "Is not [Israel] my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him I still remember him. Therefore, my heart yearns for him." That yearning is something close to loneliness.

Or finally, think of the picture of the Father in the parable of the prodigal Son. How does Jesus picture God the Father in that parable? He pictures the Father standing at the gate, waiting for his son to come home, longing to see his boy. He misses his child. It's something like loneliness.

What do you do when you are lonely? What do you do when there is someone you love who is pushing you away? You reach out to them. And as you reach out you make yourself vulnerable. 'I hate that the two of us have grown apart. It makes me really sad. Can we fix this. You mean a lot to me, and I really, really miss you.' That's the way you restore a broken relationship. You open your heart and make yourself vulnerable.

This is just how God approaches us at Bethlehem at Christmas. Jesus empties himself of his power. Jesus empties himself of his glory, and he becomes a child. He takes off the robe of divine power and lets a teenage girl wrap him in an old towel. He comes to us in weakness and vulnerability. He becomes impossibly small and weak. He does it because he can't stand this gap between us. He does it because he hates loneliness. He does it because he wants us to restore the relationship between us and the Father. He does it because he loves us and he wants us to be one.

And how do we respond to this move of vulnerability and love? Jesus turns his face towards us and we spit in it, we strike him and laugh at him. Jesus extends his hand and we grab it and drive a nail through it. Jesus makes himself frail for our sake and we crucify him. "He came to that which was his own and his own did not receive him."

You'd think that would be the end of the relationship wouldn't you? It would be for us. If we made a long difficult journey to reconcile with someone, and presented ourselves to them in weakness, only to have them slap us in the face and laugh at us, we would wash our hands of this person. But that's not what Jesus does. Jesus' vulnerability continues. He keeps loving even after the rejection. As we human beings are killing him, he keeps expressing his love for us. How can this be!?! What kind of love is this? Who loves like that? This love is either complete foolishness or it is good news of great joy for all people. This love is either foolishness or it is the love that will finally put an end to all loneliness and make all things new.

Verses 10 and 11 of our passage have that melancholy picture of loneliness, but in verses 12 and 13 the tone changes. "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." The love that came down at Christmas is still moving towards us. The Father is still standing there at the door of his house inviting us in: "Come join the party. I have a feast prepared. There's a seat ready for you at the table. There is warmth and laughter and joy that never ends."

If I were you I would accept his invitation. Are you lonely this Christmas? Maybe circumstances have left you with too few get-togethers this season. Maybe you are missing someone who won't be at your table this year and your heart aches. Maybe you have been spending all your time chasing success and approval and you find yourself with lots of money and lots of accolades, but not many friends. Whatever it is, take your lonely

heart to the manger and hear the good news of Great joy that this day brings. See Jesus lying there and realize that this child has come to this earth and made himself vulnerable because he loves you, and wants deep communion with you.

It reminds me of the baptismal prayer that Kristy sometimes prays over babies at their baptism, just before she administers the water. It's an old prayer that I think goes all the way back to the reformation, and it reminds us that when the word made flesh it was personal: "Child for you Jesus Christ came into the world. For you he lived and showed God's love. For you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and said at last, "It is finished!" For you he triumphed over death and rose to newness of life. For you he ascended to God's right hand. All this he did for you before you knew anything of it. And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled: We love because he first loved us."

Merry Christmas everyone. The Lord loves you more than you know.

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