

AUTHENTICITY

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
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I've always known what I've wanted to do with my life. I love being a minister. Though, it's nothing like I thought it would be. None of my preconceived notions ever lived up to the reality of being a minister. When I used to imagine what it was like, I thought about how special it must be to help people. How great it must be to just visit people all day. I thought of the time I could spend reading dusty old books about God and the newest books about Jesus. I love churches. Big ones like this with beautiful wood and stained glass, and small ones with see through windows and shag carpet. I also love other people's homes. I love tiny little apartments that smell like cats, and I love giant homes where money isn't a concern. I love homes that are a disaster with toys everywhere and stacks of newspapers, and I love homes that are carved into perfect places of retreat and comfort from a busy day. I love looking in medicine cabinets to see what you're all taking to stay normal, or, in other words, what you're all on! (Just joking, of course!)

Of course, the reality of ministry is that more often than not, you can't help people. Visiting people usually has a reason behind it, meaning that something bad has happened. Reading books is a luxury of time that often just isn't there. Churches just don't stand on their own; they require a commitment from a group of people. In my time as a minister, I've been pinned to a house by a German shepherd, eaten lady bugs that were inadvertently mixed in with the fiddle heads, been told I was going to hell by more people than I care to admit, I've been physically threatened by a best

man at a wedding, did a few 360s in my van before landing in a ditch, I've been accused of having hooves for feet by some seniors because I was particularly good at cribbage, and I got stung by a wasp during the first wedding I ever did. Yet ministry is not who I am; it is what I do. As my beautiful wife has told me on more than one occasion, "I didn't marry the minister, I married you."

The second son in the story that Jesus tells had no idea what he wanted from his life. All he knew was that he wanted off the farm. He wanted to leave that small place behind to go and seek the bigger and better things and places in life. There are no details. Maybe the old man was hard on him. Maybe he wanted to fall in love. Perhaps he looked at his parents and saw how hard it was to farm, how each and every moment of their lives was dependent on weather, livestock, and growth. Maybe he saw too many years of droughts, and not enough return on the investment of time and labour. He knows that he can't get far with nothing, so he makes a proposal to his father: I want out. Give me my inheritance now, and you won't have to listen to me complain any more. You can imagine the scene. "Fine, don't come back" says the father. "Don't worry, I won't" says the son. Maybe some hurtful things are said back and forth. Maybe his mother pleads for him not to go, or maybe she gives him a lecture on the real world. But he was tired of being what they expected him to be. Either way, he's gone - never to return. His path lies elsewhere.

I'm the kind of person who is slightly naive. I give people the benefit of the doubt, though I am constantly learning that doesn't always work. The youngest son goes off to find his destiny. He has a good chunk of change in his pocket, and all the freedom he could ever want. In that moment he does the one thing he has never had the chance to do: he indulges. He

let's go of any inhibitions, and finds himself at the end of the day, broke and alone. Those places where he sought fulfilment were actually not life-giving. His older brother has a theory that he spent his money on sex-trade workers. Jesus, in an act of compassion, simply refers to this time as 'dissolute living.' The money is gone, and with it, the so-called friends, and the so-called self-medicating things that once held so much fascination. But, he doesn't yet regret his actions. He regrets not being able to maintain that life. It's only when he finds himself knee-deep in pigs (and what pigs do) he "comes to himself" says Luke. And there is the perspective moment - the Gospel moment when the second son finally uncovers his authentic self.

Psychology makes a distinction between your "authentic self" (who you were meant to be) versus your "fictional self" (which is who the world has told you to be). It's here, where we are closer to the second son than we may care to admit, whether or not we squandered the inheritance.

If I were to ask, "Who are you?" How would you answer? Most of us reply with a statement that describes what it is we do. I'm a mom or a dad, or I'm a retired person. Yet the question is deeper than that: who am I at the core of my being? What do I love? What do I value? What am I passionate about?

Ministry is often about those moments when we can help people become who they truly are, not how the world has moulded them to be. Faith is about becoming who God has created us to be.

One of my favourite quotes is from St. Irenaeus, who said that the "Glory of God is a human being fully alive." When I'm with someone, I know I'm getting to the real inner stuff when I hear a sigh; and it's usually followed by a true statement.

I'm not going to labour the point, but each of us knows someone, and has been that someone, who has lived with the regret of not following a certain path, of not making the best decision, of not following our heart or of not letting go of something unhealthy for us.

I refuse to fault the second son. What is done is done. It was a costly mistake. Yet all of those moments led up to the one in which, for the first time, he realized not only what he had done, but who he was. It has been said before that the first son was lost, too - lost to anger and self-righteousness.

There are two reactions I would like for all of us to consider: The reaction of the second son, and the reaction of the people around him.

Marian Wright Edelman once said, "Do not die before you die. See and listen. Bask in the countless miracles and beauty all around you. Stay awake and alert to the incredible currents of life everywhere." (*The Sea Is So Wide and My Boat Is So Small*, p.57.)

The second son "died" before he died. He died to himself, and was reborn grateful for his realizations of who he truly was. He died to his immaturity, his self-centeredness, and his own false ideas of what it meant to truly live. And I imagine that every meal from that point on tasted better. Every sunrise, each sunset, captivated him. Each day had a meaning and a purpose that had previously eluded him. I would imagine he lived his life in thankfulness for the grace of others.

Allie loves asking me to tell her stories. She loves true ones in particular. I love telling her about the day she was born, and how Dr. Legault placed her on her mother's chest and Lori-Ann says, "I love her!" Allie knows all of the details, and adds in a few of her own such as, "She's so cute!" After I

told her the story again last week, she said, "Daddy, I want to be born again!"

Speaking of being alive, Senator Stephen Greene tells the story of the time he was in Ottawa a few months ago, when he started to choke at dinner. "I was in trouble, and Rodney MacDonald was sitting opposite me, and he said, 'Do you want the Heimlich?' And I tried to answer yes, but it wasn't coming out, and so he said it again and I nodded my head and he came around behind me and gave it to me and out came the oyster." Despite the seriousness of the situation at the time, Greene jokes about it now. "It's quite a courageous thing for any Nova Scotian to do is save the life of a senator. There are a lot of people who would think about that twice, I think," he said. (*Chronicle Herald*)

When someone you love has finally embraced who they are, we too can't help but feel a sense of happiness for them. They have been released from a way of living that wasn't really living. Maybe it's why we feel so concerned for people who are unhappy with life. The father is so overjoyed that he wraps a new robe around his son's shoulders, gives him a ring, and throws a party like no other. Of course, the father in this story is a metaphor for God. It's a God who celebrates when you leave behind everything that binds you, everything that limits you, everything that keeps you from being everything God created you to be.

Walk into the sunshine and live every single day of your life fully, with the tears of gratitude, for the miracle of it, in your eyes.

This is one of those stories that I believe has changed our world in a particular way. After all, it's a story that Jesus tells after people criticize him for eating with certain people, like tax collectors, lepers, 'women of the night.' He offers them

friendship, and he accepts theirs. Of this text, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “The sinners, needless to say, are fascinated by his treatment of them. Whatever this man has to say, they want to hear more. They draw near to him, while the scribes and Pharisees choke on their rage.”

Wouldn't the world be a different place if Jesus only ate with people who looked like you and me? Instead, because of who he chose to eat with, there are countless people fed every day around the world in his name. They were real to Jesus. They weren't just labels and statistics. And they sensed that in him.

Sometimes I imagine Jesus in line at the Karing Kitchen. Like the prayer of soup kitchens go, “Thank you Lord for giving us the chance to serve you food today.” Sometimes I imagine him sitting in a restaurant on St. George Street on a Saturday with a group that might include a drug dealer, a sex-trade worker with AIDS, and a few thieves, and buying them a burger. Because, as Taylor says about addressing our own perceptions of such people, “that to be lost is to be precious in the sight of God, and that our good behaviour rates less joy in heaven than the repentance happening at the next table.”

Home isn't just where we live; it's also about who we are. There are times when we swallow whatever pride we have left, and make that long journey towards home - not only to be embraced, but to be forgiven, to be celebrated, and to see the faces of people who recognize the change that has happened within us. We are no longer in a tomb of self-pity.

Jesus is walking toward his death now - a final visit to the city, a last supper, and a cross looms - but so does Easter and another empty tomb. He has already begun to do what he came to do. There is light shining in the darkness. And it is a message for those who hang on a cross in this very moment.