

Surviving Christmas
Rev. Hannah Petrie
December 16, 2018

CALL TO WORSHIP # 454

READING “How to Survive the Holidays” by Oren Jay Sofer

PRAYER # 482

READING “Surviving the Holidays Without You” by Gary Roe

SERMON

Today we continue with the third installment of a sermon series with the theme of Radical Kinship. We’ve looked at what radical kinship is, as defined by Father Gregory Boyle of Homeboy Industries in his book, “Barking to the Choir,” and last week we looked at an example of what it might look like for us, through a special ministry called Caring Through Touch, in which we offer chair massage to the homeless. And now, we’re looking at radical kinship in the context of the folks we find ourselves spending the most time with during the holidays: our family and friends.

It’s important to acknowledge that end-of-year holidays are often fraught and challenging for us. From the readings, you can see that I’m suggesting that the holidays can be hard in one of two ways. Either we are dealing with difficult family members who rub us the wrong way, don’t share our views, or with whom we have had past difficulty, OR we are missing the people who are gone in our lives, whether that’s through the loss of death, or the loss of estrangement. Now, if this year these challenges don’t resonate with you, congratulations! We who share these challenges are happy for you – really we are! Seriously though, if your holidays are imbued with joy, let it also be a time of thanksgiving and cause for deep reverence for all your blessings. For, we never know when our circumstances could change.

I’ve been giving this sermon a lot of thought, because I had to keep asking myself, well, gee, how DOES one survive Christmas when there is difficulty or loss to navigate. When it comes down to it, what actually works as an overriding theme we can cling to like a rock of support? What does radical kinship actually look like with the people we’re supposed to love the most?

It starts by being in radical kinship with ourselves, and really listening to where we are at this moment in our lives, in the holiday season of 2018. Gary Roe writes, “Being kind to yourself and accepting where you are will be the key to navigating the holidays in a healthy manner.”

What can often happen is that, in an effort to make the holidays enjoyable for our family and friends - in other words to meet those high expectations we’re so familiar with - we schedule too many things, and try to do too much. I love what Gary Roe writes. He says, “It’s not your job to make people happy. You can’t. They have to make that choice for themselves.” So the first thing to do is to not do this: try to please everyone in your life. Energy is a precious and limited commodity this time of year, and rather than do more, the wise thing is to do less.

I had reflected on whether this includes limiting your volunteering. On the one hand, volunteering can help get us out of our own heads, and put us in touch with our greater community, which can be both soothing and rewarding. On the other hand, it's another thing to do, that takes time and energy. We each have to decide for ourselves if it's a good idea or not. If you're grieving, it's probably better to pay more attention to ourselves and loved ones at home.

Radical idea number one: even volunteering may be too much. Try to do less to help you survive Christmas.

Gary Roe writes, "You wish you could be stronger, but real strength lies in being real with your own heart. You're stronger than you know." Even if we're not in active grief, the holidays trigger memories and feelings of the past. Rather than push them away, feel them. Give yourself that time and space. When we take time to grieve a loss, whether it's a fresh loss, or one from many years ago, we are actually honoring the memory of that person, or that relationship. It's supposed to hurt, because the love was real, and you miss it. To love we must risk the hurt, and it's part of the natural cycle of life/death/life/death/life. How hard it is to let go, and yet how necessary. We survive the holidays by paying attention to these deeper meanings, and disregarding high expectations and false narratives.

Radical idea number two: rather than focus on others during the holidays, take time with your own heart, and get in touch with what you're feeling inside. Be nice to yourself.

For me, doing less gives me more time to grieve the end of my marriage, but doing less also allows me to pay more attention to the people in my immediate midst, which of course, are my kids. I just said it's not our job to make people happy, but does this apply to our own children? Isn't it my job to make them happy? I've been doing better at being cheerful around them, in my new role as a half-time single mom, but even making an effort to please *them* can backfire.

I hadn't speculated how hard it would be to go through all the family ornaments we'd collected over the years, when we got them out to decorate the Christmas tree. We decorated early this year, because I thought that would please them. But the realization that I would need to pick out ornaments to give to my ex was pretty sad, and my feelings were in such contrast to the children's joy at unwrapping all the ornaments at once, and it overwhelmed me. I wish I had thought to go through the ornaments without the kids around first. My point is, in my efforts to please them, I forgot about myself and what would have been better for me, and since I ended up getting annoyed with them, better for them too. When I take better care of me, I can take better care of them.

When we give ourselves the gift of taking good care of ourselves we are better able to accept where others are at, too. I've been talking about doing less, but then there are the actions, that to my mind, embody the radical kinship with our family and dear friends that I'm trying to give voice to, in my sermon today. I'm talking about radical kindness. This isn't about pleasing people, but rather gestures of love that are radical because people don't expect them, and because they don't, perhaps they carry extra import. They say, "even though our relations are strained, I still feel for you, and I care." I want people, even people who are on my you-know-what list, to know I care.

I tried to find examples of such heart-rendering stories in literature or on-line. I bought the book and read, “Holidays on Ice” by David Sedaris, thinking I might find some humorous ones there. Dudes, that is one weird-ass, semi-offensive book, that I will be off-loading on my beloved, irreverent aunt and uncle as a re-gift of sorts. They will love it. But it wasn’t what I was looking for.

So, I’ll just share my own stories. I haven’t spoken to any of my in-laws in months. My ex and I are relationally sound insofar as the logistics of our kids, but that’s it. So, I thought about how I would get his stash of ornaments to him. It occurred to me I could buy a potted Christmas tree – a Norfolk pine, and put the ornaments on them, and leave it outside his door. I ran this by a favorite mentor of mine, and she said, “honey, save that money for yourself and don’t bother.”

Well, in an act of radical kinship I did it anyway, I left the tree outside his door last Wednesday, when I knew he was at work, and would be coming home with the kids later. Did he respond and say, “thanks for dropping off some ornaments.” No. There was no response of any kind. And while that disappointed me to some degree, thanks to the wisdom I had read of Gary Roe (who’s just some random self-publishing Amazon author by the way) I was okay with it. I thought to myself, well, that’s where he’s at. And that’s okay.

My second act of radical kinship toward my estranged in-laws was to send them Christmas cards with the abundance of 2018 individual school pictures of the kids. Those pictures will be dated soon, and since I’m in possession of them I know they wouldn’t get them any other way. My daughter had been coloring the December illustrations from a day-by-day calendar, so I included one of those for each of them too. I don’t say much in the cards, just dear so and so, and the canned greeting inside, and . . . should I sign it love? Or should it be FROM . . . no, of course, I should write, Love, Hannah, Pender, and Ada Lou.

I don’t think I’ll see any of those people ever again. They all live in Canada, and I’m not planning to visit, though I’ve been told I’m welcome to. Like, seriously? But I can keep up with Christmas cards, and pictures of the kids. The marriage is dead, but the kids are a testament to the beauty that was.

This may be a stretch, but it reminds me of the story of Jesus. You know, we wouldn’t know a thing about him, unless he had died the way he did. As bitter as we may feel about the end of a relationship, we must have faith that it will lead to something grander, more perfect, than what we once knew, which was just . . . beige. Sometimes it takes an extreme event, something radical, to shake us out of our auto-pilot of life, which is what I like think it was like before Jesus showed up, and shook everything up. Jesus was a man who devoted himself to the concept of radical kinship, and truth is, we can do the same. Not even with great acts of love – but just with acts of kindness.

In the end, again, it’s about the radical act of paying attention to how we really feel inside ourselves, and letting that shine out in some way. Being kind to ourselves, so we can show that to others in more powerful ways. Even if we fail to, even if we fail. We can try, try, try again, until we get it right.

So happy latter half of Advent! Let’s rock this, and AMEN.

