



The “And” of Reconciliation

Luke 15:11-32

Rev. Thomas G. James

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We live in a complicated world.

I know most of us don’t want to live in a complicated world, but we do.

We prefer to have a world that is nice, tidy, and clean. We want simple solutions and easy outs. We want to be able to lump individuals into well-defined camps, and to assume that by looking at someone, we can know all we need to know about them. We want to assume that we can look at a situation, and quickly assess a path forward that won’t have any further complications.

We want life – the personal, professional, and communal – to be easy.

But life isn’t easy. There are complications to everything. From healthcare, to capitalism, to gender identity, to discipleship, to politics, to marriage and relationships, to education and occupation, to instant replay at professional sporting events ... nothing is as easy as we may desire.

In the messiness of life, in the midst of the complications life may throw our way, we have a few options as to how we respond. First, we can try to deny the reality of the messiness. We can act as if the disorder doesn’t exist. We can say “no” to the reality that is. ... But saying “no” gets us nowhere. When we deny our present existence, no matter how complicated it may be, we get stuck and there is no path forward.

The only way to move forward, the only way to lessen the chaos of life, the only path to bringing order into the disarray is by acknowledging that which is. We must say “yes” in accepting our reality. We do not have to like it, give support to it, or even desire it, but we have to accept that which is to be able to make something new.

Once we have accepted our reality, we can decide how to move forward. Generally, the “yes” is followed by either *and* or *but*. “Yes, and ...” or “yes, but ...”

The Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana argues that the word “but” kills possibilities. It is a word that closes down the spirit of collaboration. “But,” she says, “lacks nuance and closes discussion.”ⁱ When trying to figure out how to proceed through the complications of life, the word “but” tends to do little more than elicit more “buts.” Her argument isn’t that saying “but” never provides an important pause, but instead that saying “but” always slows things down and denies possibilities. *But* that will cost too much. *But* she isn’t from around here. *But* we don’t have enough volunteers. Saying, “Yes, but ...” will limit one’s ability to overcome the messiness.

Conversely, saying, “yes, and ...” opens up possibilities. The word “‘And’ gives space for ideas to grow.”ⁱⁱ By offering *and*, we allow for new hope and new direction. Yes, *and* I think there’s another way. *And* we have some capable leaders. *And* it doesn’t hurt us to try.

When we are trying to figure out how to move forward in the complicated life that we live, the most faithful approach is embracing the reality of what is and then working to create a new life that is more abundant, gracious, and loving. This work, the call to say “yes, and ...” is the invitation of the Biblical text. We are invited to be present and engaged in the messy work, begun by God, in acknowledging the hurt of humanity and the brokenness of creation, and working together with God as God’s people to provide for new life, healthy community, and the peace and shalom of all creation.

A major part of this work is reconciliation.

We are a divided world, encamped in our subdivisions of human existence. That is part of our messiness. Whether by race, nationality, languages spoken, gender or sexual preference, religious beliefs, educational achievements, occupations, or economic status, we tend to isolate ourselves from one another into neighborhoods of homogeneity. Even in the Christian world, in this entity called the “Church,” which is supposed to be witness to God’s beautiful tapestry of creation, we are still structured in Babelistic towers of relatively uniform identity.

We are society, a humanity, in need of reconciliation.

Throughout the witness of the Biblical text and brought to consummation in Revelation is the promise that God’s created *will* be reconciled as one body. Paul promises us that the work of God in Christ is for the purpose of reconciling us – of restoring our relationships with God and with one another. Revelation promises us that through reconciliation will come restoration. We will be united as one creation, offering a unified witness of praise to God, through which there will no longer be pain, suffering, or tears. There will no longer be division, and there will no longer be the hurt and pain that comes because of division.

Reconciliation is the work of God, and as such, it should work we are engaged in as well.

But reconciliation, like the rest of life, is messy. We all have opinions of how reconciliation can and should occur. I think the problem we face in the work of reconciliation is that we often want to say “yes, but” in the process of reconciling. We often want to throw out the problems associated with reconciliation instead of naming the “ands,” which promise new life. Today’s text invites us to hear the “yes, and” of reconciliation.

The story of the prodigal brings with it all kinds of baggage. It’s one of the more well-known scriptures, and, as we’ve talked about with this parable before, our prior hearing of this text often interrupts our rehearing of the text. Like when a musician asks if there’s any requests from the crowd ... you just know someone’s going to call out “Free Bird!” When you’ve heard the story before, you don’t expect the results to vary.

But this story, this story of a father and his *two* sons, is about more than we may first realize. This text, though in part about a prodigal son who seized his inheritance long before his father's passing, and who squandered his inheritance through frivolous spending, is not just about the willingness of a father to welcome home those who have been reckless and careless stewards of their resources.

I think, at least for many of us, we want this text to be about nothing more than God's outstretched and welcoming arms that receive us when we fail to live faithfully. I think we want this text, more than anything, to be a promise that, even after our own failures, God will accept *us* back. That God might still love *me*. We want to hear the promise that no matter how loose we may be with our use of God's resources, God will embrace us graciously upon our return with extravagant celebration.

Not to say this text doesn't, at least in part, offer such a promise of gracious forgiveness. There is certainly a promise in this text of how gracious God will be for those who return in search of help and hope. But given its context, that doesn't seem to be the focus lesson of this text.

This parable is first told to the Pharisees and scribes who were disgruntled that Jesus was eating with the sinners and tax collectors. When you look at the context surrounding the first telling of this story, what we find is that the church folk – those who already considered themselves faithful members of God's covenanted people – were not the ones who believed they needed a repentant welcome. The church folk, the scribes and the Pharisees, were the ones who were disgruntled at how Jesus was dining with the sinners and tax collectors, those who were believed to be in need of repenting and returning home.

As the repentant sinner, the prodigal son, returns home, we are told that the father ran out to him to welcome him. The father does not send a hired hand, a servant, or even the older brother to welcome the son back – he goes himself. He is grateful for the son having come back home. There's a celebration for the reconciliation that is taking place, where child and father are reunited; there's extravagant gratefulness that the relationship that was thought to be beyond repair is in the works of being repaired.

Should we end the story at verse 24, which many a reader do, we would likely come to the conclusion that this text is only about how lavishly God welcomes us back into the community of God's beloved. The father exclaims, "Get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate."

What a story, and what an ending. Only, it's not the ending. Remember, verse 11 began by saying, "There was a man who had *two* sons." We haven't yet heard about the second son.

It turns out that while the younger son, the one who had gone and squandered his inheritance, was being welcomed back home by the father, the older son was out in the field. The text doesn't explicitly say that he was *working* in the field, but that is the indication of the text. The older son was out tending the land, working the fields, caring for the livestock. As he came toward the house, he heard music and dancing.

Mmmhmmm ... the party had already begun. While he was out working in the field, while he was out doing the heavy lifting for the father's property, while he was getting his hands dirty to help grow his father's fortune, the younger son had come home, had been welcomed into the house, had received his father's robe, and the party had already begun. The burgers were already on the grill.

And no one had cared to go tell the elder brother that his sibling had returned home. No one had bothered to tell him to shower up, because it's party time.

The older son hears the music and called to one of his father's slaves asking, "What's the party? What's going on?" He's told that his little brother is home, that the father has killed the fatted calf because his brother is safe and sound."

Sibling rivalries are weird this way. One might think that the older brother – the one who had done everything by the book, who had stayed home to work his father's farm, who had not been greedy in asking for his inheritance ahead of time, who had been the "faithful" son – would be excited to have his little bro back. One might expect that upon the news of his brother's return he would run in to the party and give his brother the same embrace that had been offered by the father. But no. Nope. The older brother is not excited for his little brother's return. Instead, the text tells us he gets angry. He gets angry that his brother's return is being celebrated and he refuses to go into the banquet hall.

Like the Pharisees being upset that Jesus has decided to dine with the sinners, the elder brother is none too pleased that the father is celebrating the younger brother's return.

Just as the father went out to welcome the younger son home, again, the father comes out to speak with the older son, and the father pleads with him to come in. "Join the party, son! We're celebrating your brother's return. Let us rejoice together that we are all back together!"

But the older son will have none of it. He rebukes his father, "Yes, he's home, *but* ... for all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But this other son of yours comes back" (notice, he doesn't call him a brother, he only says, "your son"), "this son of yours comes back, the one who devoured your property with prostitutes, and you killed the fatted calf for him!"

The father responds, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

It's messy. The work of reconciliation is messy. But the text calls us to greater faithfulness, and as messy as it may be, to share in God's work of reconciliation.

We can try to "other" those who differ in our hopes of keeping our distance from them; we can say that by killing the fatted calf for those who have squandered their money on wasteful endeavors, that there may not be enough for us – or that we may not be celebrated enough. We can project our anger

toward those who are welcomed with open arms in the act of reconciling humanity. But we cannot escape the invitation of Christ in this parable. We cannot miss Christ's "yes, and ..." in the invitation to reconciliation.

Yes, you may feel angry that others are being welcomed into the community, society, or the nation even after they've squandered their money ... *and*, God has provided an abundance that is great enough to serve us all. *Yes*, you may not like those whom God calls us to welcome, *and* that is still the invitation of the text, to welcome even our most despised siblings. *Yes*, reconciliation can be messy and hard, *and* God says do it anyway, because this is my work, seeking the unity of creation, the togetherness of humanity, the greater peace of society.

Hear this good news, God's love is deep enough, wide enough, expansive enough, abundant enough for us all, to celebrate us each, and to allow us to share together in a world that is reconciled and redeemed. May God lead us in the work of reconciliation, that we might respond to the invitation by saying, "Yes, and ..." who's next? Let us set the table and strike up the music as we partake in God's glorious work of reconciliation. Amen.

ⁱ MaryAnn McKibben Dana. *God, Improv, and the Art of Living*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2018.

ⁱⁱ McKibben Dana.