March 27, Lent 4C (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

Sometimes anger is a window into what needs to be mended and healed.

by Mihee Kim-Kort in the March 9, 2022 issue

Last summer I had a conversation with a woman from our congregation who is a special education teacher and a behavioral specialist in a nearby school district. We talked about everything kid-related and COVID-related, as we prepared our kids for a return to in-person school after a year of virtual learning. I felt anxious in more ways than one. Like many other parents and teachers, we noted a marked increase in anxiety and other heightened emotions among our kids, too.

This didn't feel surprising. It felt like par for the course for being a human during a global pandemic. I have always embraced being an optimist, obnoxiously proud of my ability to always see the silver lining. But I felt something change during the pandemic. Spending your days with a persistent sense of dread can fundamentally change a person. There were some dark, difficult days.

One emotion we noticed over and over in our kids was a kind of low-grade anger. I was reminded that anger doesn't manifest itself in a singular way, because it is tied to other emotions like grief, loneliness, sadness, insecurity, and more. It isn't just tantrums or outbursts or rage. What was especially instructive in my conversation with the woman from church was the reminder that behavior communicates. How a person behaves—especially if it's a child who is only beginning to learn the vocabulary for their emotions—can give us a glimpse of their inner world, if we pay attention.

And so I find myself reading this all too familiar parable of the prodigal not only for its narrative details and plot devices but for the emotions that are present. This story is Jesus' response to the grumbling words all around him: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." What is the emotion here, I wonder? Indignation? Jealousy?

In the two previous parables, so much is poured into the one sheep and the one coin. And the vast range of emotion present in the loss and recuperation—or repentance—is astounding. By contrast, Jesus' third parable, set in the context of a wealthy, privileged family, doesn't mention repentance. "It offers a different answer to the scribes and Pharisees," writes New Testament scholar Matt Skinner, "for the three parables do not simply repeat the same point." This story gives us a view of the wide complexity of human relationships, as well as insight into the kind of love and welcome that drives Jesus' ministry.

Love is among the emotions showcased in the parable, but we are given a full range: grief, ambition, desolation, hunger, compassion, joy. But it is verse 28 that makes me pause: "Then he became angry and refused to go in." At this point the younger son has come home, and the festivities are at full throttle as the older son walks in from a backbreaking day in the fields, as he has for as long as he can remember. When he hears the news that the celebration is for his younger brother, something erupts in him.

Many commentaries will explain that the older brother represents the established religious order and becomes a moral lesson for being wary of resentment, perhaps even indignation and jealousy—a subtle word directed at those grumblers around Jesus. But it's also often said that this parable is not about just one lost son, but two. And although the anger expressed in this moment could easily be explained as the emotional tirade of a morally stunted person, I wonder if it points to something deeper.

I imagine he is angry because he is tired. Low blood sugar, maybe. But the younger son is also the older son's younger brother. What if he is exhausted from years of worry as he sought to help maintain the home? Beneath his anger is perhaps shock that his younger brother is alive and home, finally. What if he just needs a moment to process it? Still, perhaps there is real hurt—as he says, his father has not recognized or acknowledged him and his work all these years. What if all these years he worked in order to make up for the loss, to try to comfort his father, and to assuage his grief?

The older son is lost in his own way. Grief, sorrow, broken relationships, and estrangement—such things can cause one to become unmoored. The parable ends with the father's words, so we don't know if the older son eventually goes in, if he stays at the threshold, or if he leaves. We don't know whether the anger overwhelms

the possibility for reconciliation. We do know that the father is persistent in his welcome, to both sons, and that the joyous return of one son shapes his compassionate response to the other. It becomes an invitation to participate in that same welcome.

I write this not long after South African Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu's death. I can't imagine a better person to teach us about reconciliation than one who lived the struggle of trying to welcome back a whole country that was lost. He writes, in *The Book of Forgiving*: "A person is a person through other persons. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. I am because other people are."

Not all anger is a moral failing. Sometimes it's a window into what needs to be mended and healed, welcomed and loved.