

Kids  
Father's Day Sermon 2016  
By Deb Downey

I get an email every morning that contains a spiritual reflection. Lately it's been about truth, and accepting what's true, rather than trying to deny, manipulate, or avoid it. My informal mantra has been, "What's true is good enough."

If the prodigal son's brother had received the email, I imagine he'd have said something like, "Oh! My father has chosen to celebrate. This is about my brother and my father – not about me." But he didn't, and so we have this very human story about someone who tries to do the right things - but still thinks about himself a lot.

I **so** understand. I had my own little experience this week. Ann kindly stopped by on Wednesday to return my platter from our church's free end-of-the-month meal. After she left, I realized I felt guilty - Because I had dropped off my food at the meal and didn't stay to help serve.

Since I **can** be a little overly responsible, I asked myself - whether there was good reason for my guilt. After all, my knee *was* hurting that day. Maybe I was just practicing good self-care. (By the way, I have been to the doctor and know there's nothing seriously wrong with my knee.)

So I considered, "how bad *was* my knee hurting that day?"

"About medium," I answered. And immediately I remembered our family vacation to Minnesota last year. I was keeping up with three young people, and I got waaay more exercise than I'm used to. And there were a couple of days when my knee hurt – "about medium" -- but I took some ibuprofen and kept going.

"Why?" I asked myself.

"Well, that was for the kids." Oh.

And my next thought was this: the people who eat at the meal are God's kids. I can do it for them too.

For decades I've explored how to set boundaries and practice self-care. And I've noticed something. For me, self-care looks suspiciously like self-discipline: boring, boring stuff like healthy food, a regular bedtime, and exercise. Bleh.

There's a part of me that wants to be like the prodigal son – the wild child. My version of drunkenness, though, would be binging on social media (and Netflix), drinking coffee and eating chocolate to stay awake.

And I'll admit my screen time exceeded healthy limits this last week. After 49 people in a Florida gay bar were shot to death by one man, [people I know](#) posted opinions on social media that don't make sense to me. They are afraid of Islam and they are afraid of gun control.

So I engaged in online conversations – I think appropriately. But I felt disoriented, and afraid of losing friends. I thought, "Don't we all go to church?" (where the basic tenant is Love Your Neighbor)? And I thought about how neighbors turned against each other in Hitler's Germany.

Until this week I'd never experienced the risks of being on the fringe because of my beliefs. I reminded myself of what Jesus experienced. And what Isaac Villegas is experiencing now. He's the Mennonite minister who married my daughter Kate to her partner Kathryn last month. The day after the wedding he resigned from the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, as the Board had advised him to in February -- when he told them about the upcoming wedding.

After she read [Isaac's public resignation letter](#), my daughter-in-law wrote a Facebook post. Here are some excerpts:

"I still can't believe this actually happened. Let me rewind a bit.

Between the two of us, Kate and I know a lot of pastors. A LOT of pastors. We intentionally passed over our UMC pastor friends . . . partly because we didn't want to put them in a hard place . . . and partly because we wanted the day to be about us, not "prophetic voice," "speaking truth to power," "being a stepping stone on the way to systemic change," etc. etc.

We were vaguely aware that Mennonite Church, USA is not really down with the gayz, but we also knew that the Mennonites are congregationally-based in their church hierarchy. Since Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship (CHMF) obviously is solidly on Team LGBTQ! People Are People Too, we really didn't think that would be a problem . . .

We had lunch with Isaac at Al's Burger Shack, and he explained that in actual fact, there would be consequences for him with the denomination if he went through with marrying us. But here's the kicker: because Isaac is a pastor right down to his cellular organelles, he was all concerned about the possible blog/media/pitchfork-waving negatively impacting us. We looked at each other, and then at him. Are *\*you\** sure? I mean. We won't lose our jobs/credentials; we *\*will\** be married, and most of the Mennos we know are CHMF folks. He said that he was absolutely all-in. Just like that. Kenosis. Just like that.

And then, CHMF members (who fully knew their pastor's credentials would be suspended over marrying two people technically outside their congregation) invited us into their homes. They fed us. They laughed with us. They cried with us. They heard our stories as we heard theirs. They shared relationship wisdom, and left us with good marriage food to chew on as we entered the weeks before the wedding. Incarnational presence. Just like that.

And then right before the wedding week, Isaac tore his ACL. He couldn't even drive. He showed up with one crutch and a knee brace...practically the size of one of the seven-year-olds he was playing soccer with when they made his knee sob. The wedding was outside, and the ground was wet from multiple previous days of rain. Even with help, I know getting down to the altar must have really hurt. And then he stood, for the whole duration of our wedding service. Steadfast love. Just like that.

Here we are, today. Mennonite Church, USA through their Virginia Mennonite Conference is disciplining Isaac as a means to discipline CHMF. Thankfully CHMF will stand behind Isaac as their pastor, but my mind is still blown. Here is a body of people who have been more Christ-like, more Church-like, and more home-like than either of us have experienced in a very long time. And the Menno brass are (essentially) trying to take Isaac out of circulation . . .

But here's the ultimate irony for you: Kate and I are still totally (and legally) gay-married. And because of CHMF's outrageous awesomeness, we are all the more determined to join a Menno congregation . . . attend regularly, tithe handsomely, and queer up the joint every gdam Sunday."

About two weeks after this, Isaac's pastoral credentials were suspended.

So his church did the only prudent thing. They threw a party – with lots of cakes – to celebrate his 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as their pastor and, as my daughter Kate said, "to celebrate his getting in trouble". And they took lots of photos and posted them on [social media](#), and invited people to send their photos with the hashtag WeStandWithIsaac. I don't think there was a fatted calf, but just like in the story they knew when it was time to celebrate.

I'm grateful for this church, and *our* celebrations, and our being together through rough times. And for all the permission to keep learning. I think we get it here – I think we understand that we're **all** God's kids.