

Coffee Connect | Prodigal Children

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SPEAKERS

Linda Booth

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Welcome to this episode of Coffee Connect, a podcast about ordinary people's encounters with God. My name is Linda Booth, and I'm retired, having served as a Community of Christ apostle for over 20 years, and President of the Council of 12 Apostles for six years. And I love stories, God stories and ordinary people's God moments. And when you connect the sacred story, the Gospel stories with an ordinary person story, we realize our stories are part of a grand narrative about God's presence in our lives, throughout history and into the future.

In particular, today, I'm going to talk about prodigal children. And in Luke the 15th chapter, there's a series of stories about things that are lost. You remember the shepherd who's has 100 sheep, and he's lost one. And he searches and searches and finds that one sheep that is so precious, and he rejoices. And then there's the next story about a woman who loses a coin, a precious coin. And she searched all through her home until she finally finds it, and she celebrates because the last has been found. And of course, the last story in that series is the story about the prodigal son, the son that leaves his father takes his inheritance, wastes his inheritance, ends up poor in the pigsty, living as if he was with nothing. And he decides to go home. He thinks, I can be a servant to my father and do better than what I'm doing now. And as he comes walking toward his father's home, his father runs out to greet him, and he puts his cloak over his son's shoulders, and he puts his ring on his son's finger, and he celebrates. And, his oldest son who's been there and has done everything his father wanted him to do. His older son is upset. And the father said, We need to celebrate and rejoice. Because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life. He was lost, and has been found. And I think those stories tell us a little bit about God's nature because, God must celebrate when one person who is separated from him has reconnected with God.

I'm going to tell you a true story. It's a story by a young man named Trace. And he attends the Chattanooga Community of Christ congregation. And there in that congregation, they've been working with young adults. And, they're equipping them for life's journey by studying the stories of Jesus, what he told about. And, many of these young adults are hard living people with how we would probably describe them. Wonderful young adults who have had a difficulty in their life. And, and the leaders of that group are challenging them to read those stories, and then to tell how those stories relate to their own lives. And so, this is the story that Trace told about being a prodigal son. He said, I grew up in the Chattanooga Community of Christ. And it was my happy place, my safe zone. My relationship with God started here. And I'm a product of the foster care system. A group of kids are walking through the

neighborhood and praying at each corner, and they invited my older foster brother in me to come to church. Well, we went and kept coming. And soon I got baptized and confirmed, followed by my older brother, and then our foster parents. I was seven years old the first time I came to church here, and I attended four times a week until I was 18 years old. And our relationship with our foster parents was always a struggle. But the fault ran both ways, he said, but the real issue was because of being abandoned in early childhood, by our biological parents, and so we had a lot of silent screams that we never dealt with, and invisible tears that will never wiped away, and it can create deep scars embedded in your soul. Trace said that, my older brother moved away from Tennessee as soon as he turned 18, and we lost touch. I stayed here and gave in to the temptations of the streets, which have plagued me my entire life. Being at church was the only time I was free from these temptations. However, the streets landed me in prison for three years. I chose a lifestyle, much like the prodigal son. I ended up in deep manure, homeless and desperate like him. I also ended up being the father of an adorable little boy, and caring for him and his mother. I finally stopped running from one party to the next long enough to think about how I ended up in these deep messes. I realized I had been running away from God and had removed myself from the only true and good family I'd ever had... Chattanooga Community of Christ. I came back home to my church, bringing with me, my small son and his mother. Like in the prodigal son story, it has been a celebration for us ever since. Love, acceptance, and my true identity as a person called by God, supported and nurtured me again. Watching my son participate in the sacrament of the blessing of children was beautiful. His mom and I sitting next to each other, sharing in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, brought us even closer together. I'm working on getting my life headed in the right direction. Being an active part of this church community is important for improving our lives. I'm back and already involved in leadership. Last Sunday, I shared my getting real testimony. Hearing a room full of people shout, "yo, buddy," for me was a humbling, and empowering experience. This prodigal son is back.

I connect with Trace's story, because you see, I'm a prodigal daughter. I came from a long line of faithful servants who lived their discipleship in Community of Christ. Church was the center of their lives. It was for me too, until I attended university and became fascinated with philosophers who did not believe in God. In April 1966, a Time magazine cover asked, Is God dead? And I began to doubt all that I had been taught, and determined that there was no God. And if there have been a man named Jesus, he was simply a man, and surely not divine. I met my husband Doug, who was raised an atheist. And he remembers when he was about eight years old, asking his Aunt Francis if there was a God, and she implied. "Oh, no, Doug, there's no God. That's just a figment of people's imaginations." Well, Doug, and I fell in love. We married and we had three sons. And, neither of us talked about God, thought about God, or considered believing God was real. Doug worked for a man name Harold. He and his wife Pat, had attended a Marriage Encounter weekend sponsored by the Catholic Church. Now Harold became a cheerleader for the retreat weekend. And every morning, Harold would ask, "Have you signed up for Marriage Encounter?" And every time I called the office, Harold would ask me, "When are you going to sign up for Marriage Encounter?" When I asked him what the weekend was about, he described it as focusing on communication. Well, Doug, and I have never had a problem with communication. So the weekend didn't appeal to us. We didn't want to waste a weekend away from son's, family, and friends. But finally, we signed up just to get persistent Harold off our backs. The Marriage Encounter weekend was in a monastery in Kansas City, Kansas. It was an interesting place. Our bed pulled out of the wall, our room was stark and with minimal furniture, the crucified Christ hung on the wall. We were not

pleased when the priests told us that this was a silent retreat, meaning no one but the instructing priest talked. No conversation over meals, no talking in our rooms, complete silence. All our communication to each other was through written letters. We each received a notebook and a pen. That turned out to be pretty good. We both enjoyed writing and reading our letters to each other. But the last day of the retreat was writing love letters to God. Although at first foreign, we followed the priest's instructions and wrote letters to God.

Through that simple act of writing, Doug and I both felt something profound. I knew it was the Holy Spirit from experiences growing up. For Doug, this feeling was brand new and exhilarating. When we got home, we tried to figure out what to do with this experience. Doug suggested we find a church. Having been raised in the reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. I said, Well, let's try the Catholic Church, where we had had the experience. But Doug wisely suggested we find my church. So we looked up the nearest church in the phonebook. On Saturday night, we drove past the little congregation on Park Street in Olathe, we got a babysitter to take care of our children so we could go to church the next morning, and I still remember nearly everything about the service. Marlon Constance was the presider. David I. the speaker, His scripture was about Jesus knowing us so well that he can count the number of hairs on our heads. The congregation laugh because Marlon was nearly bald, and David's hair was thinning. After the service, the people surrounded us with love. Fran and Barb invited us to the sweetheart banquet on the next Friday evening. And when we said yes, they told us they would pick us up, and we went and had a great time. We took our sons to church the next Sunday and every Sunday thereafter. And Doug and our oldest son Bernie were baptized. Sons, Ben and Bart were blessed. Doug was called to the priesthood and we became youth leaders, etc. The rest is history.

The Marriage Encounter weekend and that little congregation's hospitality changed the trajectory of our lives and our family. Because of what happened to me, I get passionate in my teaching and preaching about a congregations call to be inviting and welcoming. God had a purpose for my life and my family. Because of the Olathe the congregation's love and wealth come to us and our children. I have served as a minister. I know many others yearn for community that will love them, empower them, and be the spiritual home they need. I know because I often meet them and listen to their stories of transformation.