

# An Invitation to Jump

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Acts 15:1-18

So I had to do a lot of praying to prepare for this sermon. Steve gave me this opportunity to preach on Mother's Day, which I gladly accepted. And then I read the text. Circumcision, really? On Mother's Day? Between us, my husband Bryan and I have five daughters (from age 17 to 24) - we have spent the better part of a decade trying to keep them away from boys and well you know...their parts. And that's what I get assigned from the Narrative Lectionary to preach on today?! Talk about irony!

Talk about needing prayer. Some of you know that my best prayer time is when I am running with our Husky named Malachi. There is something about having no distractions - no people, no phone - along with some endorphins being released that really help me to listen and to connect with God in a unique way. So I would read the text that we just heard - Acts 15:1-18 and then I would go for a run to see what God might have to say to us through this passage on Mother's Day, 2017.

Another thing I have to share with you is that I have this habit of picking up garbage that I see - as I am running. This is probably a combination of the way God wired me for Creation care - growing up in Montana, loving and caring for the great outdoors along with my years of being a Girl Scout Leader: *try to leave a place better than how you found it.*

Now I have had some people scrunch up their noses at how I can pick up somebody else's disgusting garbage and then I remind them that I am running with, being pulled by a 75 pound Husky...the garbage aint nothing compared to what he gives me to pick up! If you know what I mean.

So one day last week, in my collection of a pop-tart wrapper and some napkins, I picked up a full piece of paper that said "Pulling Report" (like pulling weeds). It looked like a convenient list with little boxes

so the worker could just look at the list of checked things that need to be pulled out from the rest. And I thought about how I hope my name isn't on the list. And I thought about the Gentiles, who weren't physically like all the Jewish Christians, so they were to be pulled out. And they were to be pulled out of something quite significant: salvation. In the first verse of our Scripture passage, we read, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Can you imagine? Given the absence of anesthesia in the day, I think a lot of men would encourage their families to take their chances and to worship the sun god or any other god who doesn't demand such a price to be paid. Yet these Jewish Christians were serious about their request!

This seems harsh, but we have to remember that circumcision was a **BIG** deal for the Jews. God's Chosen People had two primary identity markers: circumcision - given by God to Abraham, and the Law - given by God to Moses. Heck, even John and the Baptist and Jesus were circumcised. It kind of makes sense that certain individuals would think that the way to Christ is by first doing the stuff required to be like Christ and to be more like one of God's Chosen people.

We love to have a checklist don't we?! Especially if we have everything on it and we are holding the clipboard. Those of us in the church can be the worst. Then we can stand at the door and check the boxes for those trying to get into the party. Keep the Sabbath? Check. Worship only the one true God? Check. Honor your Mother and Father? Check. And now...if you wouldn't mind hiking up your robe just a smidge? Oh no...I'm sorry. You don't make the cut. Next!

I wish it weren't true, but there's something in our human nature that makes us feel kind of good about checking all the right boxes for us...and being the gatekeeper for everyone else. Unfortunately this goes back to the beginning of our faith roots when Cain thought his checklist wasn't as complete as Abel's, so he got rid of the competition. Cain killed him.

This kind of checklist - of who's good enough or who does enough - is the opposite of everything that Jesus lived...and died for.

Steve is having the elders, the deacons and staff read a book called *Velvet Elvis* by Rob Bell. Bell uses the image of a trampoline to help us understand the mystery of God and how we can be in relationship with God and with one another, given the limitations of our finite, earthly knowledge.

The fun mat that you get to jump on is like Jesus or God. The springs holding the mat are necessary so we can jump. The springs aren't God. The springs aren't Jesus. The springs are statements and beliefs about our faith that help give words to the depth that we are experiencing in our jumping. Bell would call these the doctrines of the Christian faith.

They aren't the point. They help us to understand the point. They stretch and flex with our questions and doubts and they bring a fuller, deeper and richer understanding to the mysterious being who is God. God is bigger than our imagination, but the discussions and doctrines are necessary to give us insight, understanding and language to be able to experience God. The springs only work when they serve the greater cause: us finding our lives in God.

So when the question about circumcision came up as a potential barrier to letting everyone jump, Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them. We have to reach back to the beginning of Acts when the Holy Spirit came upon all of them, (not some of them, not just the blondes, not just the circumcised). The Holy Spirit came upon all of them, both Jews and proselytes (those who converted) speaking in every tongue under heaven, so that all could hear and understand the Word of God. Peter says in Acts 15, verses 8 & 9, "And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us." Did you hear that? God made **no**

**distinction** between them and us. We are all invited to jump.

And you know why? Because Jesus came to earth, not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus paid the price for the requirements of the law, so that we all can now be in direct relationship with God. Peter stood up and said, in verse 11, "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." How will we be saved? Through the grace of the Lord Jesus.

I'm not going to lie, grace is like a four letter word for us competitive people. I happen to be an over-achieving, get 'er done (with excellence) kind of gal. I also happen to be just the tiniest bit competitive. My favorite letter is A plus. My second favorite letter is...I don't have a second favorite letter, I only like A's. I promise we aren't going to turn this into a therapy session for Laurie. But I want to explore this concept of grace with you.

Brennan Manning writes, "The heart of Jesus loves us as we are and not as we should be, beyond worthiness and unworthiness, beyond fidelity and infidelity; He who loves us in the morning sun and the evening rain without caution, regret, boundary, limit, or breaking point."

This kind of grace-filled love is a gift. We can't do anything to get it. We cannot follow enough rules or check enough boxes to get it. We can't earn it. We don't deserve it.

To say that someone deserves grace is a contradiction in terms. You can no more deserve grace than you can plan your own surprise party. In the same way that planning voids the idea of surprise, so claiming to deserve voids the idea of grace. You can ask for it. You can plead for it. But the minute you think you deserve it, it is no longer grace. It is something you have

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earned. Jesus paid the price and He offers it to you and to me as a gift! And the best part, really, is that Jesus offers it to the whole world. Jesus said in Acts 1:8 “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” To the ends of the earth...and we don’t have to worry that there’s not enough to go around.

It’s kind of like being a mom. There isn’t a finite amount of love to offer. I remember having Jordan Marie 24 years ago. This little 6 pound bugger taught me how to love. And I remember talking to my mom about being so afraid to have another child, because I thought there was no way I could possibly love another being as much as I loved Jordan. I will never forget my mom telling me that there are plenty of things that I will worry about as a mom, but this never has to be one of them. She said that she couldn’t explain it, but somehow, God gives you enough love for the next one. After experiencing the same infinite amount of love for Halle, I didn’t even worry when I was pregnant with Sophie.

Friends, God’s love for us is like a mother’s love...on steroids. I know that I’m one of the lucky ones with the relationship I have with my mom. I think of the way she has always listened to me without judging, how she encouraged me, supported me and really delighted in me. Her unconditional love is the closest thing I have felt to the love of God. And yet I know that the perfect love of Christ for you and for me shines 1000 times brighter.

In response to this awesome love, I want to grow into the person God has created me to be. I want to please him, not unlike how I never wanted to disappoint my mom. I never thought I was at risk of losing her love, but I wanted to love her back by pleasing her with my words and actions. I think God’s kind of the same way.

And when I think about loving God back, I think that the way of Jesus is the very best possible way to live and to respond to God’s love for us. Rob Bell puts it like this:

“I’m convinced being **generous** is a better way to live. I’m convinced **forgiving** people and not carrying around bitterness is a better way to live. I’m convinced having **compassion** is a better way to live. I’m convinced pursuing **peace** in every situation is

a better way to live. I’m convinced **listening** to the wisdom of others is a better way to live. I’m convinced being **honest** with people is a better way to live.” Jesus demonstrated this kind of living. In his compassion, peace, truth telling and generosity, he was showing us God. He was showing us the good life.

I can’t do it perfectly. I can’t earn his love; I certainly don’t deserve it - given all of the dumb things I’ve done. But by his words and actions, Jesus showed us that He isn’t standing at edge of the trampoline with the checklist - of which we could never fulfill. He’s inviting us to jump! To jump with him and to jump with one another. We don’t get to choose who’s jumping and who’s not. And it might help us to remember that God’s grace is ridiculously inclusive. Apparently God doesn’t care who He loves. He is not very careful about the people He calls His friends or the people He calls His church.

Henri Nouwen was a legendary priest and teacher who taught at highly respected universities like Harvard, Yale and Notre Dame. But Henri came to believe that those settings did not - for him - bring out the person God created him to be. So this famous writer spent the last 10 years of his life caring for physically and mentally challenged people at a small community called L’Arche.

While he was there, Henri made friends with a resident named Trevor who had many mental and emotional challenges. One time when Trevor was sent to a hospital for evaluation, Henri called to arrange a visit. When the people who ran this hospital found out that the famous Henri Nouwen was coming, they asked if he’d meet with some doctors and other “important” people. He agreed, and when he arrived, there was a fabulous luncheon set up in a special place called the Golden Room - but Trevor wasn’t there.

When Henri asked where Trevor was, they told him that Trevor cannot come to the lunch. “Patients and staff are not allowed to have lunch together, and no patient has ever had lunch in the Golden Room.”

Henri told them that the whole purpose of his visit was to have lunch with Trevor. If Trevor is not allowed to attend the lunch, then Henri wouldn’t be attending either.

Somehow, they suddenly found a way for Trevor to attend the lunch.

The Golden Room was filled with adults who were really excited that the great Henri Nouwen was in their midst. Some tried to get up close to him. They thought of how great it would be to tell their friends that they got to “hang out with Henri Nouwen the other day.” (Today they would be posting it on Facebook and Instagram). Some people pretended to read books they hadn’t read to appear smarter than they really were. Others were upset that the rule about separating patients and staff had been broken.

Trevor didn’t take notice of the fuss; he just sat next to Henri. And at one point when Henri was talking to the person on his other side, he didn’t notice when Trevor stood up to speak to the crowd.

“A toast,” Trevor said. “I will now offer a toast.”

The room grew quiet. What in the world is this guy going to do?

Then Trevor began to sing, “*If you’re happy and you know it raise your glass, If you’re happy and you know it raise your glass, If you’re happy and you know - if you’re happy and you know it, If you’re happy and you know it raise your glass.*”

At first people weren’t sure how to respond, but Trevor was beaming. His face and voice told everyone how glad and proud he was to be there with his friend Henri. Somehow, in his brokenness and joy, Trevor gave a gift no one else in the room could give. People started to sing, softly at first, but then with more enthusiasm, until doctors and priests and Ph.D.s were almost shouting, “If you’re happy and you know it...”

No one was trying to show off anymore. No one worried about the rules. No one tried to separate the Ph.D.s from the ADDs. God’s grace is like that. **It levels us.** It’s not about the amount of money you have, or the number of degrees, or your physical appearance or anything else we try to put on the checklist...it’s about the joy of jumping.



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