

RENEWED
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αwakenings

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Inside This Issue:

Page 2

*The Refusal of the
Older Brother*

Page 3

Testimony

Page 4

HeartGroups

Book of the Month
for March

Page 5

RHM's
Social Jesus Blog
on Patheos

Page 6

West Virginia
Legislative Session

Page 7

Jesus for Everyone
Podcast

RHM's Free Resources

Budget Thermometer

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Herb Montgomery



"If you believe God loves someone, justice for them isn't far behind. Love for those on the margins is the seed out of which the reality of God's inclusive, just future sprouts."

The Refusal of the Older Brother

by Herb Montgomery

**"The older brother became angry and refused to go in."
(Luke 15:28).**

This story in Luke's gospel may be the most famous one Jesus ever told: the story of the prodigal son and the older brother. Jesus told this story for a reason. "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" (Luke 15:1-2)

In response, Jesus tells three stories, the last of which is the story of the older brother we are considering here.

"But while he [the prodigal son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and

is found.' So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field.

When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. 'THE OLDER BROTHER BECAME ANGRY AND REFUSED TO GO IN. SO HIS FATHER WENT OUT AND PLEADED WITH HIM. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son OF YOURS who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" (Luke 15:20-32, emphasis added.)

The context of this story is economic. "Prodigal" is not a synonym for "sinner." It means someone who spends money and resources recklessly with no thought of the future.

People labeled others sinners in Jesus' community when they lived outside of certain interpretations of what it meant to be faithful to the teachings of the day. The label "sinner" has always been tied to the social purpose of marginalizing and/or subjugating certain folks while privileging others. I'm not saying that there are no such things as intrinsically

destructive choices. I am saying that designating someone as a "sinner" is bound up with social, political, and economic exclusion because it is based on the interpretations of those centered in society. And in this story, Jesus is including those whom the elite of his day taught should be excluded.

I was once a fundamentalist. I used to believe that the only reason anyone would not be "saved" in the end was that they had rejected God's love for them. But the longer I ponder the story of the prodigal and his brother, the more I see how mistaken I was.

The context of this story shows that if any are left in "outer darkness" (see Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) if any are left out of Jesus' vision of God's just future, it will not be because they could not believe God's love for them. Rather, like the older brother in this story, it will be that they cannot accept the inclusion of someone else that they feel should be excluded. It's labeling someone else as other and seeking to exclude them from the table that causes us to be intrinsically out of harmony with Jesus' vision for God's just future—a world of safety, compassion, inclusion, justice, and love—a future we can shape.

Again, the elite class of the Jesus story didn't reject Jesus' vision of God's just future because God's love for them was too good to believe, but rather because God's love for those they thought should be excluded was too inclusive for them to embrace.

One last example.

continued on page 3

"When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. 'So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ALL THE PEOPLE SAW THIS AND BEGAN TO MUTTER, 'HE HAS GONE TO BE THE GUEST OF A SINNER.'" (Luke 19:5-7, emphasis added.)

This is the famous story of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, who climbed into a tree to see Jesus pass by (see Luke 19:1-2). As a person who is also of a shorter stature, I know that if you are short, you step up onto the curb to see a parade, and the taller people stand behind you. This works unless some people do not want you there and shut you out from a good view.

But Zacchaeus, being resourceful, knew the procession route, ran ahead and climbed a tree.

When this parade begins, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to confront the economic injustice of the economic, political, and religious elite at the heart of that society. But Jesus stops along the way to include this tax-collector who he perceives is changing his mind about Jesus' economic teachings on the poor. Imagine the people objecting to Jesus, "But Jesus, this man is a sinner!" Zacchaeus interrupts them all:

"Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'" (Luke 19:8)

Just a few days earlier, some of the Pharisees had responded to Jesus' call to give their possessions to the poor by "sneering" at him (see Luke 16:13,14). I can imagine Jesus with tears of joy in his eyes at this chief tax collector responding so differently. "Today," he says to Zacchaeus, "salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9).

Not everyone acknowledged that salvation had come.

Those left outside in Jesus' story about the prodigal and older brother are not those whom the elites had labeled as "sinners" to be excluded. No, the ones outside the party are the ones who cannot handle Jesus modeling a just future where those they feel should be excluded are included instead.

What is the Jesus story whispering to us here? Those left out of Jesus' vision of God's just future won't be those who couldn't believe in God's love for themselves. They'll be those who could not embrace God's love for someone else—someone whom they thought should not be included. If you believe God loves someone, justice for them isn't far behind. Love for those on the margins is the seed out of which the reality of God's inclusive, just future sprouts.

If in the gospels, God's just future looks like Jesus, and Jesus looks like the one we find in the Jesus stories, then this should give those who believe in and practice exclusionary forms of Christianity quite a bit to ponder. Some

sectors of Christianity today still practice inequality for women. Some sectors of Christianity still practice the bigotry of colonialist, European, and American White supremacy. Sectors of Christianity still practice the same economic classism our society does. Large sectors of Christianity passionately exclude our LGBTQIA siblings. But to the degree that Christianity has practiced and led others in the practice of systemic and private distributive and inclusive justice, it has thrived. To the degree that it has failed to practice justice, it has done much harm to people and to itself.

The question Jesus followers today must ask is this: when we see Jesus' inclusion being practiced, do we celebrate like those who "went in" in Jesus' story, or do we mimic the "older brother," refuse to "go in," or even threaten schism to protect our practices and sense of superiority?

HeartGroup Application

1. What movements do you see at work to bring about more inclusion and mutual participation in your faith communities? As a group, make a list.
2. What movements do you see at work to bring about more inclusion, representation, and equity in our larger society? As a group, make a list.
3. Brainstorm with your group how you can collectively participate with the work you see being done in both areas. Pick something from what you've come up with and put it into practice this coming week.

Thanks for checking in with us.

Right where you are, keep living in love, choosing compassion, taking action, working toward justice. ■



Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

Testimony

"I appreciate you and this ministry more than you know." – LH

HeartGroups

Jesus's social vision was a world where people take responsibility for taking care of other people. Each part of the good news he shared with the poor—survival, resistance, liberation, restoration, and transformation—depends on community. We can't fully follow Jesus's teachings outside of community. HeartGroups are spaces where we can practice what Jesus taught together.

Community

We're connected to one another. Society and social structures teach us that we are independent and should be self-reliant, but we're part of one another. We're dependent on each other and our communities are equally interdependent. We are each other's fate.

Most HeartGroups meet weekly or monthly for a time of sharing, discussion, and exploration of Jesus's teachings and how they apply to our lives today. Discussion can center on social events, a book the group is reading, a topic group members choose, or one of the many HeartGroup Applications that Renewed Heart Ministries publishes each week. In HeartGroups we learn from each other.

Mutual Aid & Resource Sharing

HeartGroups are more than places for spiritual communion. They also have an economic component: Jesus' shared table was about following him, not just worshipping him and so the church of the book of Acts aimed to eliminate poverty among their members with mutual aid and resource-sharing (Acts 4:34).

HeartGroups affirm that part of being connected to each other is belonging to a community where members can be helped when down and out and they can also help others. Each group chooses for itself whether to branch out and help those outside its group too.

Jesus called us to embrace the belief that there is enough to share. Our voluntary sharing replaces anxiety with gratitude, generosity, connectedness, community, and hospitality. Rather than monopolies and exploitation, "enough for everyone" brings with it a distributive justice and replaces violence with peace.

Non-hierarchical Equality

Our hope for the future is not in more efficiently exercising power over others, but in more effectively serving and taking care of each other. HeartGroups imitate the shared table that Jesus modeled for his disciples in the gospels. In these groups, we sit together as equals. Our differences are celebrated, not demonized. HeartGroups are non-homogenous groups where every voice matters and we learn from each other. HeartGroup sharing is open and participatory. These are not places where the same person does all the talking each week while everyone else sits and listens. Each person is believed

to have something of value to contribute to the group as a whole.

Inclusivity

We believe that every voice matters and that every person's story matters. We're interested in a world where people who have power and resources share with those who are meek. Those we fail to include at our shared table are often also excluded in the larger society, and no world we create will be a safe, compassionate, just home for people we don't include or value.

continued on page 6

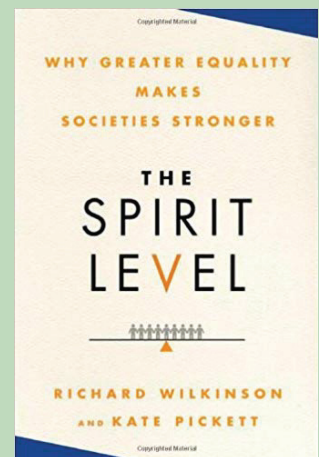
Book of the Month for March 2020

***The Spirit Level:
Why Greater Equality Makes
Societies Stronger***

**by Richard Wilkinson
and Kate Pickett**

Groundbreaking analysis showing that greater economic equality—not greater wealth—is the mark of the most successful societies, and offering new ways to achieve it.

This groundbreaking book, based on thirty years' research, demonstrates that more unequal societies are bad for almost everyone within them—the well-off and the poor. The remarkable data the book lays out and the measures it uses are like a spirit level which we can hold up to compare different societies. The differences revealed, even between rich market democracies, are striking. Almost every modern social and environmental problem – ill health, lack of community life, violence, drugs, obesity, mental illness, long working hours, big prison populations – is more likely to occur in a less equal society. The book goes to the heart of the apparent contrast between material success and social failure in many modern national societies.



The Spirit Level does not simply provide a diagnosis of our ills, but provides invaluable instruction in shifting the balance from self-interested consumerism to a friendlier, more collaborative society. It shows a way out of the social and environmental problems which beset us, and opens up a major new approach to improving the real quality of life, not just for the poor but for everyone. It is, in its conclusion, an optimistic book, which should revitalize politics and provide a new way of thinking about how we organize human communities.

Also, remember, you don't have to order this book through amazon.com, but if you do, please consider using Amazon Smile (smile.amazon.com) and selecting Renewed Heart Ministries as your designated charity for a portion of your purchase to be donated to RHM at no additional cost to you.

SOCIAL JESUS

A Blog Exploring the Intersection of Faith and Societal Justice



Recent Posts from RHM's "Social Jesus" Blog on Patheos

patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/



When Preaching A Message of "Love" Doesn't Lead To Justice

Our experiences determine not only the questions we ask but also the answers we get back. Plain readings are not plain but are read through the lens of our own paradigms and fears.

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2020/02/whenpreaching-message-love-doesnt-lead-justice/



The Patriarchy, Justice, and Jesus' Misunderstood Teachings on Divorce

In Spirit, Jesus' teachings on patriarchy and divorce call us to reject seeing anyone as a disposable means to our own pleasure and gratification. People matter.

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2020/02/patriarchyjesus-divorce/



Interpreting Sacred Texts in Life-Giving Ways

Interpretations are not eternal. They change with time. As we see the harmful fruit of present interpretations, we can make those interpretations give way to new ones, in the hope that new interpretations will bear the fruit of life. And if we see that our new interpretations also do harm, we will challenge them too.

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2020/02/interpretingsacred-texts-in-life-giving-ways/



Push Back from the Establishment

Where do you see establishment push back against a vision of future society that is more distributively just, today? Maybe these passages can offer us some encouragement as we stand up to injustice.

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2020/02/establishmentpush-back/



Jesus' More Unpopular Economic Teachings

I agree with Robinson. Jesus' vision for the world was one where people took care of people. It was a call not to rest your peace of mind about the future in hoarded wealth. When we have to choose between more wealth or people, Jesus called us to choose people.

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2020/02/jesusunpopular-economic-teachings/



Trump, White Christianity and the Parable of Insipid Salt

I'm not sure what Christianity's future is. But I do believe that, to the best of our ability, we must rediscover the gospel Jesus himself taught, not merely a gospel about him. We must then take these teachings and weigh their fruit, asking what they may offer our work of love, compassion, and justice, today.

Read more at patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2020/01/whitechristianity-parable-insipid-salt/



WV Legislative Session

This year's legislative session for our state is coming to a close. And here at the end, there are several bills that threaten the separation of church and state that are quickly moving through our House and Senate.

One such bill is HB 4780 which seeks to allow Bible classes to be taught in our public schools. We here at Renewed Heart Ministries feel that state tax dollars should not be spent to employ a teacher to teach any religion's sacred text.

Yesterday I traveled to our state capital in Charleston, WV with two friends of mine, who happen to be Jewish, to stand and speak in opposition to this bill.

There were many good things said yesterday at the hearing. Here are the comments I made on the need to keep both matters of religion and matters of state separate:

"My name is Herb Montgomery and I'm the director of Renewed Heart Ministries, a faith-based non-profit here in West Virginia.

In Mark 12:17 we read, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'

There is a distinction here between matters belonging to Caesar and matters belonging to God.

The ten commandments, held sacred by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, distinguish between morality and civility. The first four commandments relate to

morality or one's responsibilities toward God. The last six (murder, theft, etc.) relate to civility, our responsibility toward one another.

The state governs civility.

In matters of morality, one's beliefs and actions toward one's God, the state has no place.

We have a civil government, not a moral police.

Regarding teaching the Bible in public schools, whose interpretation would be taught? Christian or non-Christian? If Christian: would it be Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox? If Protestant: would it be Evangelical, Mainline, or Historically Black Protestant?

What about safeguards for religious minority students? As someone who knows the social pain of growing up being different in WV what protections are in place for students who choose to opt-out of these classes? I remember being bullied for something as simple as what I brought in my lunch. My peers didn't know what a vegetarian was, much less that someone could be one for religious reasons.

In West Virginia, the influence of our varied religions make us who we are as a state. Our state should make no law respecting an establishment of those religions.

There's an old Baptist saying related to the long Baptist tradition of teaching that church and state should be kept separate:

'If you mix horse manure and ice cream it doesn't do much to the manure, but it sure as hell does ruin the ice cream.'

HeartGroups continued from page 4

Gathering times for HeartGroups are by design a time of sharing life together. We share our joys and our struggles. We share how each of us experiences the world around us, and we attempt to integrate these diverse experiences into a meaningful and coherent whole.

Inclusivity does not mean "anything goes." Allowing even respectful disagreement over whether another person should exist is not "creating safe space." Our inclusivity excludes bigotry, fear, and insecurity regarding our differences. In the rare event that someone may be excluded, the group must measure whether this exclusion is rooted in fear of that which is different or truly supports group safety.

HeartGroups gather in informal community gathering places such as living rooms and local coffee shops. They center their values and ethics in the experiences of those on the undersides and margins of our societies. Wherever they're located, HeartGroups will be informed by the sayings and teachings of the historical Jewish Jesus of Nazareth and help each other lean more deeply into the practice of these teachings.

Each week we offer optional activities for HeartGroups through our eSights and weekly podcast. If you would like more information on how to start a HeartGroup of your own or to find an already existing HeartGroup in your area, please contact us:

Email: info@renewedheartministries.com or call us at: 304.520.0030

Affirmation

Learning about Heart Groups and then getting to help start one has been an amazing journey. Meeting weekly as a Heart Group has allowed me (and others) the opportunity to learn about God in a more relaxed and comfortable arena compared to a more traditional church setting. I feel safe to share my questions, struggles, and blessings because I know we are all learning together. I like the idea of "doing church" like Jesus did, with a mutual exchange of ideas and learning. No one person is superior to another, we just live life together, and it's great! -L.D.



Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

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JESUS FOR EVERYONE

Podcast

WWW.RENEWEDHEARTMINISTRIES.COM

The "Jesus For Everyone" podcast

New episodes every Friday!

A weekly podcast where we discuss where faith in Jesus and social justice work for the vulnerable today intersect and what a first-century, Jewish, Galilean prophet of the poor might offer us today in our work of survival, resistance, liberation, restoration, and transformation.

**renewedheartministries.com/
Podcasts**

**2020 Projected Budget
Goal: \$185,000.00**

**2020 Projected Monthly
Budget Goal: \$15,417.00**

**January's Contributions
Received:
\$7,836.02**

**2020 Contributions
Received To Date:
\$7,836.02**

Renewed Heart Ministries is a nonprofit organization working for a world of love and justice. We need your support to impact lives and provide the kind of resources and analysis RHM offers.

Intersections between faith, love, compassion, and justice are needed now more than ever.

***Help Christians be
better humans.***

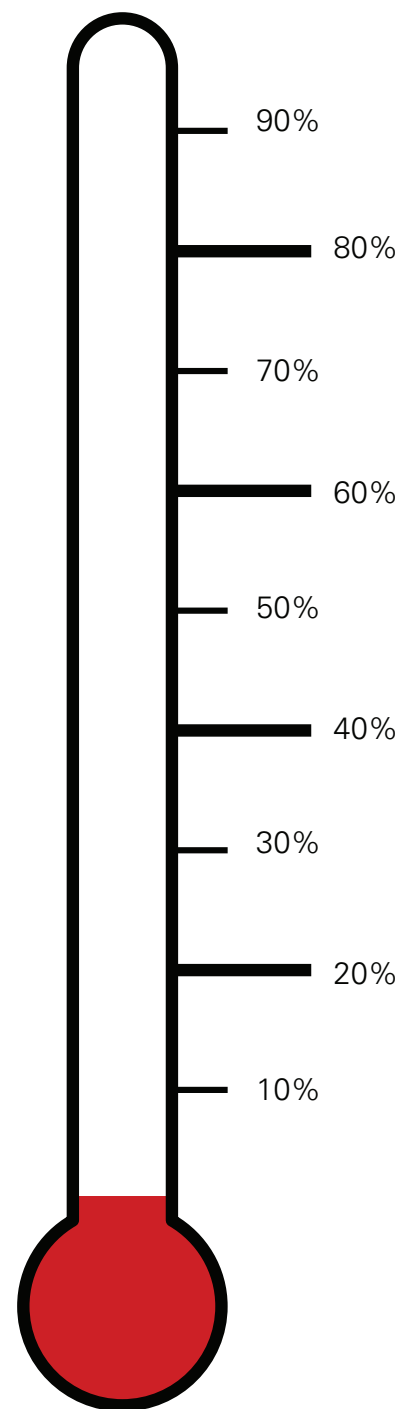
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Renewed Heart Ministries, today.**

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and click "Donate." Or if you
prefer to make a donation by mail,
our address is:

Renewed Heart Ministries
PO Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

**And to those of you out there
who are already supporting
this ministry, I want to say
thank you.** We could not continue
being a voice for change without
your support.

**Whether you give \$5 or \$5,000,
every amount helps us continue our work.**



Renewed Heart Ministries is a not-for-profit group that is passionate about rediscovering, following and helping others rediscover the teachings and sayings of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. We believe these teachings have an intrinsic value in informing the work of nonviolently confronting, liberating and transforming our world into a safe, more just, more compassionate home for us all.

Everything we do here at Renewed Heart Ministries is for free. Even the many educational events that we hold in various venues. You can support our work either with a one-time gift or by becoming one of our monthly contributors by going to RenewedHeartMinistries.com and clicking the **donate** tab at the top right.

Or you can mail contributions to:
Renewed Heart Ministries
P.O. Box 1211
Lewisburg, WV 24901

Also, please sign up for our free resources and remember, every little bit helps.

Anything we receive over and above our annual budget we happily give away to other not-for-profits who are making both personal, systemic and structural differences in the lives of people who are less privileged.

And to those already supporting the work of Renewed Heart Ministries, your generous support makes it possible for us to exist and to continue being a presence for positive change in our world. So with all of our hearts, "Thank You."

Together we are making a difference, till the only world that remains is a world where only Love reigns.

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"Faith is a decision.
We cannot avoid that.
'You cannot serve two masters'
(Matthew 6:24) . . .
With this Yes to God belongs
an equally clear No. Your Yes
to God demands your No to all
injustice, to all evil, to all lies,
to all oppression and violation
of the weak and poor . . ."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Poland, April 9, 1938

The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 203