

Hands down, the most watched, most beloved Christmas movie in the Pierce household year after year isn't *“It's a Wonderful Life,”* or *“Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer,”* but *“Elf”*—the comedic story of an orphaned baby named Buddy who crawls into Santa's sack one year in New York City and then crawls back out at the North Pole, where Santa, having a soft spot for children, decides not to return buddy, but to let him stay and be raised by Papa Elf, a gentlemanly type character who never married but always wanted to have a child, and who sees in Buddy the opportunity to fulfill his dream. As Buddy grows up, he thinks of himself only as an elf; he does not know he is a human being. All he knows is that he seems to have a harder time fitting in around the North Pole. His large fingers and 6-foot frame make him stand out from the other elves, but he does not know why, he does not know it is because he is human. Then one day, when the secret can be kept no more, Santa tells him that it's time for him to take a trip to New York City to meet his real father and to discover who he really is. Only Buddy's father doesn't even know Buddy exists, and he will find it impossibly hard to believe that his biological son is a grown man who wears yellow tights, eats only food containing candy, candy canes, candy corn, and syrup, and thinks himself a Christmas elf.

In one poignant scene, Buddy's dad, played by James Caan, takes Buddy, played by Will Ferrell, to a pediatrician's office for a blood test, to prove whether or not Buddy really is his son. Sitting in the waiting room, Buddy meets a young girl named Caroline who can't help but notice his yellow tights and black shoes curled over at the toes with jingle bells on them. “Your costume is pretty.”

“Oh, it's not a costume,” he tells her, “I'm an elf. Well technically, I'm a human, but I was raised by elves.

To which Caroline says, “Oh, well I'm a human, raised by humans.”

If ever there was a summary statement for the season of Lent, this might be it: we are humans raised by humans. Christmas and the incarnation of God in Christ can say all it

wants about how we are humans raised in the image of God, but sooner or later, Lent comes around with its humbling and troublesome declaration: we are humans raised by humans.

In this way, I think Lent is perhaps the most serious thing we do as Christians all year round. For six weeks, every year we deliberately and intentionally change our prayers of praise into prayers of confession. We look ourselves in the mirror for a long, hard time and ask ourselves, what have we become, and what must change? The more daring among us will let others stand in front of the mirror with them. We'll let others tell us what they see and think of what we've become, and what must change. The truly daring won't just let others do this—call ugly, ugly—we'll ask them to do it. We'll open the door and give them full access to the prejudice, the jealousy, the arrogance, the obsession with possession, the privilege of race, the anger, all the things that have become such a part of us that we don't even know they're there anymore—we'll give our friends and family the broom and ask them to sweep out the corners and underneath the carpet of our lives, because we ourselves can't see what's accumulated there.

But who wants to do that? We are not naturally inclined to step into the confession box together, to speak our sins so all may hear. If there is a tendency on our part to rush through Advent in order to get to Christmas, there is an even greater tendency to want to hide out during Lent, to say, "I don't want anyone to see me, to know me. But if they have to see me, let them see me giving up chocolate or taking on a community service project. That way I can say I've come clean in my life, but still look good doing it."

But it won't work, for we are humans raised by humans. I think of what Adam said to God in the Garden of Eden, when God wanted to know why he and Eve were hiding out. "Where are you?"

"I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself."

"Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

And Adam tells God, “It wasn’t me. It was that woman you put here in the garden with me. She gave me the fruit, and I ate it.”

A generation passes and one day Adam’s two sons, Cain and Abel, are out in the field where, in a fit of jealousy, Cain pulls a knife and kills Abel. Now listen to what happens next and tell me you don’t hear an echo in the room. God says to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“Am I my brother’s keeper? What do I know of my brother?” Hear the echo? Where did Cain learn to pass the buck like that? We know exactly where Cain learned it, he learned it from his father.

But it won’t work. As sure as Cain’s blood could be seen in the fields, the truth is known: we are our brother’s keeper, and our sister’s too. We are humans raised by humans.

I would guess that most of us are familiar with Rudyard Kipling’s *“The Jungle Book,”* in which we meet Mowgli, a small boy who is raised in the jungle by a pack of wolves and becomes playmates with a panther named Bagheera and a bear named Baloo. Mowgli is very happy coming of age in the jungle, where he knows himself only as one of the pack. But because he does not see himself as being human, he also does not see the threat he poses to the jungle because he is a human being, and this forces Bagheera and Baloo to have to decide whether to forcibly remove Mowgli from the jungle in order to protect both him and the animals. When Mowgli pushes back against being removed, they relent and allow him to stay, but only for a while longer. “So Mowgli went away and hunted with the four cubs in the jungle from that day on,” we read at the end of one chapter. “But he was not always alone, because years afterward he became a man and married. But that is a story for grown-ups.”

Becoming a man and getting married—I say, that is a story for grown-ups. For who doesn’t know that when we get married, we become adults, and adults know that in marriage, we give ourselves over to another human being. We put our hands and hearts all over them, and we let them do the same in return. We strive to live honestly, to bear one another’s confessions, to give and take forgiveness, to share joy.

Some of my favorite weddings have been the ones between elderly people. Not long after I got ordained, I was asked to officiate at a wedding for a man and woman who had both been widowed after being married for over 50 years. The couple met at an aqua aerobics class. He was 82, she was 79. When I asked them why they wanted to get married again, he said, "She looks good in a bathing suit." She said, "Marriage is about discovering yourself, and the best discoveries are made in pairs."

I like that. Marriage is the best discovery made in pairs. Put another way, it's one human being raising another human being.

Which brings us to the paralytic man in our reading today. I don't feel the need to say very much about him. Chloe did a beautiful job of introducing him to us, and the details of his life are there for all to see. He can't walk. We don't know how long he's been unable to walk, only that he can't walk today. We know that his inability to walk has turned him not only into a social outcast who probably spends his days in isolation at the corner of some busy road begging for spare change, but it has also made him into a talking point. People walk by him every day on their way to church and talk about what he must have done to become this way. How his inability to walk must be a sign of some unconfessed sin in his life that God is punishing him for, or an indication that he just isn't willing to work hard enough to overcome his disability, so he deserves what he is getting.

I suppose thinking about the man this way makes it easier and more convenient for us to pass him by. If it's not our fault that the man is this way, it's also not our responsibility to fix him. After all, the scribes and Pharisees are clear about it: we're not God. We can't forgive this man, we can't heal him and make him whole.

Then along comes what Luke simply calls, "some men," carrying the paralyzed man on a stretcher. Luke does not try to distinguish them in any other way. They too are just men; human beings who see in this paralytic one of their own. Bringing the paralytic to the house where Jesus is, they see how difficult it will be to get the man past the large crowd

that has gathered around Jesus. It's like a healthcare crisis in which those who need to see the doctor most, for one reason or another, can't. But these men, these *other* men, see another way. They go up on the roof of the house, bust a hole in it, and lower the man down to Jesus.

And Jesus, who does believe we have the power to forgive sins, who does believe we have the power to overcome all discrimination and bigotry, and to return each other to community, who does believe we have the power to change the way our economic and social systems work, who does believe we have the power to raise one another up to wholeness again, Jesus speaks to the man's crippled body and crippled spirit and declares, "Let it be so."

It's not difficult. Really, it's not. It starts with a table, a loaf of bread, and a simple statement of grace: "This is my body, broken for you. Take it, eat it, all of you." Amen.