

“The Great Welcome”

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

~ Psalm 32:1

Our Gospel Lesson today may contain one of Jesus’ most familiar parables, but I think its primary message is often missed. Biblical scholars, editors, and pastors have often given it the title, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” or “The Parable of the Prodigal Son and His Brother,” but these titles overlook the most important character, the father. Jesus begins this story, saying, “There was a man” (v.11). So this is a story about many things, but above all it is about the compassion, forgiveness, and love of this father, "a man who had two sons." **I have begun to wonder if the lack of attention given to the father has something to do with our resistance to becoming like him. Do we *really* want to be like him?**

After all, here is a parental figure who seems so naïve, giving his unruly son whatever he wants, when he wants it; and throwing a party when his son finally does what he should have been doing all along. And when we consider that this figure is supposed to represent an image of God, I’m sure there are at least some who cringe with the older brother, the Pharisees and scribes. His actions do not seem fair. Where is the justice? Where is the “tough love?” There should *not* be a party; not for this younger son, not *him*. He’s *not* worthy to be called, “Son.” He’s lucky he got his foot in the door. At least let him finish his confession!

Henri Nouwen has written extensively on this parable, while reflecting on Rembrandt’s depiction of it (see bulletin cover art); and at one point he writes, “Here is the God I want to believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing... always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their

shoulders. His only desire is to bless...He has no desire to punish them.”¹ **This may sound wonderful to you, but I assure you there are plenty of people for whom this image of God is wrong and offensive.**

For some, God is a god who is more ready (and more likely) to punish, than to party. Their motivation for discipleship is fear, and the emphasis is more about what *we* do than what *God* does—it is works over grace. It is a step towards making God in *our* image. *In extreme cases* it shows up in sandwich boards and picket signs—REPENT! THE END IS NEAR or GOD HATES FAGS!—or it may just show up as a BURNING CROSS. At one of these kinds of demonstrations, a counter-protester held up a sign that said, “GOD HATES SIGNS.” I think that’s about right.

Yet we do find such characters in the Bible, who prefer a God of vengeance and wrath over a God of longsuffering and grace. When he was called to preach repentance to the city of Nineveh, the unwilling prophet, Jonah, ran and ended up the belly of a big fish. Jonah did not want to warn the people of Nineveh because he knew that if they repented, God would not let them be destroyed. And Jonah wanted them to be destroyed. Even after Jonah finally delivers his message and the people of Nineveh repent and God forgives them, Jonah complains: “[I knew it! I knew it!] I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” (Jonah 4:2b). To which God replies, **“Is it right for you to be angry?”** (4:3)

And there are other instances in the Gospels where the Pharisees and scribes balk at Jesus’ fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (Mk. 2:15-17; Lk. 5:29-32). He even earns a reputation among them as “a glutton and a drunkard” (Mt. 11:19). And in almost every instance the Pharisees and scribes are mystified and offended by his behavior, asking, **“Why do you eat (and drink) with tax collectors and sinners?!”**

Marcus Borg would call Jesus’ behavior an act of “radical grace,” where “God’s acceptance of us is unconditional, not dependent upon something we believe or do. But radical grace,” he notes, “has most often been too radical for most Christians.”²

¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 95-96.

² Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2003), 76.

We might ask ourselves, “**Why is it so difficult for some of us to accept this image of God, whose love is unconditional and unlimited?**” Nouwen offers one possibility, saying that “[i]n a world that constantly compares people, ranking them as more or less intelligent, more or less attractive, more or less successful, it is not easy to really believe in a love that does not do the same.”³

Fred Craddock suggests that “[p]erhaps it is because of the competitive rather than cooperative spirit of our society, but the common thought is that there must be losers if there are winners. Hence, even in religion, it is very difficult not to think of Jews *or* Gentiles, rich *or* poor, saint *or* sinner, publican *or* Pharisee, older son *or* younger son. But God’s love is both/and, not either/or... **The embrace of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the older; the love of tax collectors and sinners does not at all negate love of Pharisees and scribes. Such is God’s love, but we find it difficult not to be offended by God’s grace toward another, especially when we have questions about that person’s conduct and character.**”⁴

Even in our churches, there can be a competitive or comparative spirit that favors members over non-members, longtime members over new members, and pastors over laypeople. Yet we who are many are called to be one (in Christ) in the Kingdom of God, and our life together is to be one in which “the last is to be first and the first is to be last” and “the greatest among [us] must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (Mt. 20:16; Lk. 22:26).

So, in spite of our offended sense of fairness, God persists with the Feast. The compassionate character of the father is Jesus' answer to the "grumbling" and questioning of the Pharisees and scribes, who begrudge Jesus for welcoming and eating with sinners (v.2). Jesus, like God, like the father, cannot help but celebrate when the lost are found. It's like there's this commandment: **THOU SHALT CELEBRATE, SING, and DANCE...whenever the lost are found, come home.** It's in his DNA. He explains this perfectly earlier in Luke's Gospel:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

³ Nouwen, *The Return*, 103.

⁴ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 188.

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. **Be [compassionate], just as your Father is [compassionate].** (Luke 6:32-36)

Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. That is the commandment and that is the nature of Jesus' regular meals with tax collectors and sinners and outcasts—compassionate celebration. It shifts the motivation for discipleship from fear to love. They are joyful feasts; and they are also the beginning of discipleship, which is *not* without risk.

In welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners and outcasts, Jesus not only risked being associated with them, but he risked being associated with the extravagant, abundant, offensive love of God. **I say “risked” because it was this kind of behavior that got him killed. Not only did Jesus eat and drink with “sinners,” he died with them.** And even from the cross, with nails in his limbs, he welcomed them, saying, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise,” and he forgave them, saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34, 43).

With total disregard for his own well-being and social acceptance, Jesus showed compassion, the compassion of the Father, eating and drinking with the lost, who had been found. And I am sure that amidst the laughter and eating and drinking Jesus took the time to explain the cost of such compassion. **I am certain that by the time the meal was finished those tax collectors, sinners, and outcasts understood that when God chooses us, finds us, we become involved in God's love for the world; and with great joy comes great responsibility. Now go and be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.**

As Nouwen writes, “...there is a call beyond the call to return. It is the call to become the Father who welcomes home and calls for celebration.”⁵ Once you have experienced *The Great Welcome* you must accept the call to become The Great Welcom-er.

“Becoming the Father” involves a series of decisions. First, you must “come home,” you must REPENT. When you lose yourself and are able to *come back to*

⁵ Nouwen, *The Return*, 119. I've been reading this book of Nouwen's since I was in high school and continue to be indebted to him for his insights and reflections. I began to see passages like the one from Luke 6:32-36 in a whole new way, the commandment to be compassionate standing out more than ever.

yourself, when you examine your life in the light of God's love, you will realize (as Nouwen reminds us) that everything you've been searching for is at home with God. It is good to confess your sins then, but I cannot guarantee God will let you finish your speech. Come home.

And when you get to that place, there should be a joyful celebration. In the words of poet Mikis Theodorakis, "There [should] be a wild dance." We must celebrate whenever *one* brother or sister comes home. We must celebrate for those who were thought dead but are alive, who were lost but are now found.

Then choose to become like the Father. Become fathers and mothers who wait—through grief and worry and hope—and welcome and celebrate with reckless abandon...again and again and again. Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. For:

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

~ 1 Peter 2:10