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Your Welcome: Your Heart

Luke 15:25-32; 1 Peter 4:8-9

We continue this evening/morning with a sermon series that asks the question, "How is YOUR welcome?" How welcoming are you to the stranger who walks through our church doors? We discovered that we aren't nearly as friendly as we think we are. And so, we are trying, through things like Guerilla Greeters, to be more aware, more friendly, more welcoming. But it's not just about going through the paces, is it? In the book of 1 Peter 4:9, we read this: Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

Even if we shake someone's hand...even if we greet someone...even if we slide over to make a place for them in our pew...if we are grumbling about it...if our hearts are cold towards them, the resentment we will ooze out of us! So...I want to talk about our hearts. And to do so, I want to share the greatest story Jesus ever told. Jesus was a brilliant teacher. But no parable surpasses this one in revealing the lavish and reckless nature of God's love toward us. We call this the Prodigal Son. Some call it the parable of the Lost Son. But really...it is a parable of two lost sons.

Act 1. [Jesus]said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

As westerners, it is impossible for us to appreciate how disrespectful this son was toward his father. In Middle Eastern culture, for a son to make this request was tantamount to saying, "I wish you were dead. I don't want you; I want your stuff. And I don't want to wait until you are dead for me to get it." In fact, commentators say that such a son would be beaten and disowned for making an outrageous request like this.

But it gets more outrageous. It wasn't just a matter of dad going to the bank and cashing in his IRAs. A man's wealth was tied to his land...and land was EVERYTHING. To fulfill the son's request, he would have to sell off some of his estate. The pain of that is captured in the verse that says, "And he divided his property between them." The Greek word for "property" is "bios," from which we get "biology." It means "life." So a more literal translation would be, "The father tore his life apart and gave it to them." Do you hear how wrenching this would be? Let's read on:

And when [the son] had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father.

The young son squanders his inheritance and ends up in the most humiliating job a young Jewish nobleman could hold: pig-slopper. Remember, pigs were unclean for Jews. My tour guide in Israel, Jacob, is a non-observant Jew. He never goes to synagogue and rarely observes Jewish rules. But when I asked him, then, if he ever ate pork, he was horrified! "Never!" he replied. "It would be unthinkable." It's so embedded in their culture. And yet, this boy finds himself in the pigpen.

Which slaps some sense into him. He decides to go back home with his tail between his legs, beg his father's forgiveness, and ask to be taken in as a servant. He knows he has blown his son-ship. But maybe, out of pity, Dad will give him three hots and cot. So he heads for home.

And now comes one of the sweetest, most grace-filled pictures in the Bible. Apart from Jesus on the cross, I don't think you can find a more powerful image of the compassion of the Heavenly Father for his lost children than what you are about to hear.

But while [the son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

There is so much that is sweet about this story. First, how is it that the father saw his son "a long way off?" Because...he was doing this. He was doing what he had done every day since his boy had left. Pacing back and forth at the edge of his property, hoping for, praying for, watching for the return of his beloved son. As shamefully as he has been treated...as humiliated as he was in the eyes of the villagers ...this father still loves his son. Recklessly. Every day, he scans the horizon, hoping against hope that this will be the day that his prodigal boy returns.

And that day comes. In the distance, too far off to be seen by anyone else, the father recognizes a familiar form...a familiar stride. And then, he who has already humiliated himself in so many ways, humiliates himself again. He lifts up his robe...and he runs toward his son. Middle Eastern men NEVER run. It is considered scandalous to reveal your bare legs. A respected nobleman ALWAYS walks, carrying himself with dignity. A 2nd century Jewish theologian wrote, "A man's manner of walking tells you what he is." But the father tosses all this aside. He sees his boy...he lifts up his robe...he bares his legs for all to see... and runs like he hadn't run since he was a child. He throws his arms around his son. The Greek says he kissed him again and again. Can you see the tears streaming down his face?

But it doesn't stop there. Dad calls for the best robe...which would have been HIS OWN ceremonial robe...and places it around this filthy scallywag. He orders a ring placed upon his finger, a sign of authority. And shoes for his feet. Only sons wore shoes. Slaves went barefoot. And then, with a robe of honor--and his arms--wrapped around his son...dad escorts him protectively through the gantlet villagers who would have been standing there tsk, tks, tsking...right through crowd...and right back home.

And to top it off, Dad kills the fattened calf for a feast to end all feasts. One family could not eat all that meat and there was no way to preserve it. You only killed the fattened calf when you invited the entire village to a party. Instead of hiding what he had done from the townspeople, the father invites them right into the midst of his joyful reunion. He doesn't care what they think...and he hopes they celebrate with him.

Isn't that a wonderful story? If you stopped there, it would STILL be the greatest story in the Bible. And many people prefer to stop there. But there is one more son. Who is just as lost as the first...only he doesn't know it. So listen to the end of the story:

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

There are so many things about this passage that make me uncomfortable. The first comes right at the top: "Now his older son..." The Greek word for "older" is... *Presbuteros*. What does that sound like? Yep! Presbyterian! I don't like the fact that our denomination shares a name with this jerk of a son.

And we quickly realize that the two sons just aren't that different. The Presbyterian son...let's call him Pres... is just as disrespectful as his brother. For instance, the elder son was expected to play the host at any family feast. But Pres won't even enter the house. He stays outside and pouts...just like Jonah did! He makes his father come out to him. So disrespectful! And then, his language...is outrageous. Normally, a son would address his dad as "My esteemed father." How does Pres begin his angry speech? "LOOK!" he says. Literally, "Look, you!"

Even WE would find that disrespectful, right? Dads...how would you respond if your teenage son walked up and said, "Look, you!..." It becomes quickly apparent that this son has lived a life of resentful goodness. "I worked hard...I obeyed all the rules...yet you never offered me a scrawny goat for a party. But when THIS SON OF YOURS came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"

Can you hear the contempt? "This SON OF YOURS." He is so bitter, so grace-less. His father pleads with him. In fact, he tries to turn the tables. "Isn't it fitting to celebrate since this YOUR BROTHER has come back from the dead?" "You call him MY son...but he is YOUR brother, too! Have you no compassion for your brother? No joy that he who was so lost has been found?"

What may be most unsettling about the story is this: we never hear Pres's answer. The story stops right there. We don't know if Pres recognizes his selfishness. If he repents. If he says, "Oh, Dad, I'm so sorry. I see how bitter I have become." We don't see him running into the house, throwing his arms around his little brother in a sweet and tearful reunion. No; it just stops right there...and we are left to wonder how things turned out.

BOTH of these sons were lost. One is lost in his wasteful, sinful, selfish pursuit of pleasure. And one is lost in his grudging, resentful, rule-keeping obedience. Neither really wants the father. They only want the father's stuff. Both of them embarrass and disgrace the dad. But only one repents and is restored to the Father's love.

You know...I hate how much I identify with the Presbyterian. But I do. A child of the church. A rule-follower. Obedient. Compliant. Dutiful. Loyal. And when I see others who are NOT those things...I can get resentful and judgmental and superior. Am I the only one here this evening/morning who suffers from this Presbyterian affliction? The longer we are in the church, the more judgmental and suspicious and inconvenienced we can become with those who do not behave the way they should!

Every weekend, there are broken sons and daughters of God who stumble back into our house...into the Father's house. People who have squandered opportunities, thrown away their lives, lived ungratefully or selfishly, brought shame upon themselves or their family. They may be disgusted with themselves. They may not feel like they belong. But they so long to belong...that they're willing to take the risk. And so, cautiously, they stick their heads inside the doors.

And we who are already on the inside of the Father's house have two ways we can respond. We can respond like the Presbyterian. (Turn back) With judgment or resentment or suspicion at the intrusion that they represent into our familiar rhythm.

Or, we can respond with the Father's heart. (Act out on stage). Praying... watching... expecting them to come back. And when we spot them from far off, rushing toward them to welcome, to enfold, to protect, to escort, to restore them to the place God longs for them to have...the honored place of the beloved son or daughter.

Back in the sixties, during the time of the hippies, there was a large church in the south that was known for its dignity and formality. The head usher wore a tuxedo and everyone dressed to the nines. One Sunday morning, in the midst of this parade of glamour and propriety, in walked a young hippy girl. Tousled hair, tie-dyed T-shirt, tattered bell-bottom jeans, and barefoot, of all things. She was apparently oblivious to the fact that she did not belong. Because she walked right down the middle of the aisle...around in front of the pulpit...and she sat down. On the floor. Cross-legged.

You could hear the gasps. The murmurs of outrage. You could feel the temperature going up. And then, down the center aisle, walked the head usher. Black tie. Proper. Dignified. As he moved toward the front, people began to point and whisper. He was going to take care of this outrage. They couldn't wait to see what he would do. The dignified gentleman reached the front of the long sanctuary, turned the corner, stood over the girl for a moment...and then lowered himself down and sat on the floor next to her for the rest of the service.

THAT...the father's extravagant, generous, humble heart...is the true heart of welcome. Do we have that here? Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. May God grant us the courage to see ourselves for what we really are...and may his Spirit give us the gracious, welcoming heart of the father.