

## **WELCOME 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019 – 5 Lent '19 C**

Luke 15:11-32

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! We are so glad you are here! Special welcome to all our visitors and guests...It is wonderful that you are all here! It's our privilege & joy to serve you in worship today...Please stay with us for morning tea after worship & if you have any questions about anything that we do this morning...just ask the person seated near you...they won't bite.

We are also excited today because a bunch of our younger saints are helping out in worship...part of the leading & serving & that's great...so give 'em a big high 5 later & tell them thanks!

*"That's just ridiculous! Straight outta sci-fi fantasyland. You don't really believe it do you?"* The conversation was about some of the famous/familiar accounts in the Bible... I had to admit he had a point...the stories seem fantastic to even think about: Jonah & the big fish...Balaam & his talking donkey...the walls of Jericho... Jesus walking on Water...Every account, & there are more just like those, seems outrageous...impossible...beyond the pale...beyond belief?

And then there's today's Prodigal Son No part of this well-known parable unfolds like it would in real life...or life the way we know it...From the Father giving in to an ingrate of a son in one minute to welcoming him home with hugs & rings & robes & feasts the next. No part of this parable unfolds like it would in real life...or life the way we know it...

But maybe that's the point: God is so extravagant in mercy - has so much forgiveness to grant that God dishes it out with abandon...so much grace to offer that God pours it upon us whether we deserve it or not...so much love to share that God can only lavish it upon us so recklessly that it's just plain hard to believe.

Until, that is, Jesus goes all the way to Jerusalem to die on the cross to show us just how serious God is about loving us, forgiving us & welcoming us just as we are because he has a place of welcome set up as a lavish feast – a banquet – a party to end all parties...just for us...

We'll explore & experience that together today...and like the Father...we're glad you are here today!

Let's pray...

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

*Eph. 2:4-6 - God is so rich in mercy, & he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead...For he raised us from the dead along with Christ & seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus.*

*Father no way we deserve to be called your own children or to have Jesus come die so we could live with you forever...but here we are by your grace. Draw us deeper into the life of your Son day by day that the fullness of his love may flow out of our lives to others. Use us as agents of your Kingdom of grace to create a place of welcome for all who are called in by your Spirit. Cause our hearts to cling only to you, for the sake of Jesus Christ who is love grace mercy & joy for all... Amen.*

*"I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found."*

— **Henri J.M. Nouwen, Return of the Prodigal Son**

*"Unlike a fairy tale, the parable provides no happy ending. Instead, it leaves us face to face with one of life's hardest spiritual choices: to trust or not to trust in God's all-forgiving love."*

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## 5 LENT '19 C – AT THE TABLE: A PLACE OF WELCOME

### FAITH CHAT:

1. What is it like to be lost?
2. What stops you from living your life as a party every day?

I'm with the sheep on this one...Man...I don't get it. I don't fully understand the shepherd getting all doe-eyed & teary over a sheep that didn't have sense to stay on the safe side of the fence. I don't fully comprehend a party for someone who's hell-bent on their own destruction. I truly struggle...Every parent knows; "What you reward will be repeated." What do you do when the kid runs off next time? Pawns the radio, g-ma's brooch

Implicitly we understand this is sheer madness. No part of this parable unfolds like it would in real life...or life the way we know it...No father in his right mind would take this: "Hey dad...I've got an idea...go w/ me on this...ok? Let's pretend you're dead. Just for the sake of argument...let's pretend you're dead...& I take my cut of the family pie. How 'bout we try that?" And the father does...sells off land & livestock to give the ingrate 1/3 of the family wealth (remember their wealth is not in stock/mutual funds/cash...they had land & they had livestock & big bro gets 2 shares baby bro gets 1 & big bro has just seen his holding decreased by a selfish wretch whose nappies he used to change) But now he's got it. Such an arrangement!

There is no doubt this father loves his sons...but when our love is rejected & our honour disrespected publicly...We get mad. We get even. We *DON'T* just get over it. Everyone hearing this parable would have written the next paragraph to include the younger son being whipped w/ the nearest implement the father could get to hand & being sent out alright bleeding maybe unconscious...not with a bankroll. That's what fathers do. That's how fathers answer rebellion within their own homes.

No part of this parable unfolds like it would in real life...or life the way we know it...So...A week at schoolies a few more at the Crown in Melbourne & a quick famine later... I mean the new dragon tattoo is nice & all but he had to pawn the nose-ring to get his last meal...Now with nothing in his pockets but holes...What's a fella to do? He's broke...We know this part of the story...He gets a job on a pig farm & keeps at it long enough to figure out the pigs are the priority...pigs have the best part of the deal.

But the kids has just enough sense to remember that for some crazy reason dad is abundantly gracious. Even the servants have leftovers in the fridge...Unlike his current boss, with dad the hired help has more than enough...Now...Stop there...

This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> parable in a row...bangbangbang Jesus fires off Lost sheep Lost coin Lost son. Something gets lost & is found again...What's the money line for the 1<sup>st</sup> – the lost sheep? shepherd seeks, finds, retrieves, carries home party...*"In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents & returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous & haven't strayed away!" – Lk 15:7* Lost coin? Lamp broom search find party *"In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."* – Lk 15:10

What's missing as Jesus tells the final parable...? Any guesses? There is not one word of "repent." 2X in a row Jesus uses that word...this time...that word does not appear...22 verses it. Ain't. There. Not. At. All. What does THAT mean?

Well...There is nothing really redeeming in his decision to head home. There is no sense that he realizes he's been a jerk, broke dad's heart, & has mom crying herself to sleep every night. There is no indication he thinks of home as anything more than a meal ticket. His little speech says nothing about making amends or knowing he'll never repay the insult or the financial loss. Maybe he heads home simply because he reckons dad just might be a soft touch & he can get 3 squares & clean sheets. For guy who's starving & smelling of pig, that is reason enough. He may be working his little speech all the way home & behind those words he might still be an ungrateful obnoxious punk. Man, I really want him to be sincerely repentant...I want him to be a groveling mess...but Jesus seems not to care as he tells the tale.

You know who else doesn't care? Dad! Ol' pops spies the stink-cloud wafting over the horizon & he's off at the gallop...bowl the little bugger over with a bear hug & a whiskery smooch like he did when the boy kicked the winning goal in his 1<sup>st</sup> soccer game. Kid starts his speech but Dad is too busy giving orders to the servants chasing after him like he's off his rocker...Who knows whether his confession is sincere or not, he doesn't get to finish it...robe ring sandals calf party...That's all Dad can bluster because he's got the kid locked up in another hug like he's never going to let go. Hang on...robe – ring – sandals...those are the marks of an heir... the identifiers of a son...He did get out the bit about not being fit to be called a son but who is & who is not a son is THE FATHER'S BUSINESS not the boy's...& the Father has always seen his son as a son. Even in the far country – even in the distant land the Father sees the son as a son...separated by his self-centeredness but a son nonetheless & Now. He's. Home!

*"We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead & has returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found."*  
I'm looking but I see no grovelling/no payback/no proper cooling off period/no clean up your act/no get your life together. The father blows all that up with his kiss, robe, ring & feast. But maybe that's the point...because no part of this parable unfolds like it would in real life...or life the way we know it...Screw up, apologize, receive grace – makes sense to us... That's how **WE** work it in this world. But God's way isn't our way...Christ's kingdom is not of this world...He loves this son & nothing can diminish or destroy that love.

*But God is so rich in mercy, & he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ & seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. God is so extravagant in mercy - has so much forgiveness to grant that God dishes it out with abandon...so much grace to offer that God pours it upon us whether we deserve it or not...so much love to share that God can only lavish it upon us so recklessly that it's just plain hard to believe.*

Until, that is, Jesus goes all the way to Jerusalem to die on the cross to show us just how serious God is about loving us, forgiving us & welcoming us just as we are because he has a place of welcome set up as a lavish feast – a banquet – a party to end all parties...just for us...

*"A man had two sons..."* the story begins...And we know both are lost along the way: one lost in his own selfish impudence...the other lost in his begrudging view of his father and his sonship as akin to slavery & spits venom because dad is loving forgiving and generous to a fault. But the father is insistent ...**BOTH** now & always are his sons... **BOTH** now & always have a place at his table **BOTH** now & always have a place in his heart...**BOTH** are heirs...**BOTH** are loved desperately/unflinchingly/unstoppably.

God wants only the restored relationship of love & joy. God desires your presence at his table. He alone determines the nature of the relationship...he refuses to hear the youngest's little speech just as surely as he rejects the oldest's disowning of his brother. God alone determines who comes into his presence...neither your vices nor your virtues matter in the embrace of the Father.

God loves us so much God doesn't wait for our confessions to forgive us. God doesn't wait for us to come to our senses to love us. God doesn't wait for sincerity to redeem us. God just comes after us, running toward us helter skelter like that desperate, crazy-in-love, just-glad-we're-home father...

Celebrate. Party. Rejoice. That's what God does every time he welcomes someone home. Throws a lavish party, where love abounds, forgiveness flows freely, laughter spreads & joy multiplies. Wherever you come from, no matter how far away you have been, the party today is for you - for the Father longs to embrace you in his arms and say, 'Welcome. Welcome home.'

Let's pray with that in mind...***Loving Father, you spared nothing, not even your Son, that we might be called your children & know our true home. When we wander from your presence, give us the confidence to turn toward you, knowing the welcome, the love, & extravagant grace that awaits us as you run to meet us. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.***