

The welcoming heart of God

Luke 15.1-3, 11-32

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The parable of the Prodigal son is one of the greatest stories in our Bible. Many artists throughout the centuries found the story so overwhelming that they made fantastic paintings, for instance, of how the father lovingly embraced the returning son.

Think of how Rembrandt painted the prodigal son, kneeling before his father, who tenderly welcomed him home.

The story has many layers of meaning, and I wished I could speak about it at length. But I will limit myself, and focus today on the most obvious storyline: someone was lost, then he was found, and then the father of the boy threw a party. Lost, found, party...

1. Father welcomes us home

The central moment in the story is, when the father receives his child into the home again.

Ofcourse this was a Jewish father, and one, obviously, who owned real estate. A wealthy man, with servants. And as a Jewish man of some standing in his village, he knew the Jewish laws.

“Do not touch someone who is impure, do not touch a sinner, because that makes you impure. And then you are not allowed into the Temple in Jerusalem for a while.”

The love of the father was so much larger than his worry about the wrongdoings of his son, he embraced him and he did not ask questions.

I am sure the questions came later. The confessions by the son would surely come. How he wasted his inheritance; how he lived a rough life; how he had to guard a group of pigs - lower a Jewish man could probably not sink.



God knows how deep we people have sunk. He knows all things. But his first contact with you and me is not that he throws the lawbook at you.

This is because our many transgressions, our sins, are not the core of our problem. The heart of our human problem is that we have left God, our Father and we act as if he does not exist, as if he were dead.

Our problem is more on the side of a lack of love than a lack of laws. The heart of sin is that we are separate from God, and that is why we do wrong things. Our behaviour is a result of having let go of God.

The story of the prodigal sons shows us how deep the love of our heavenly Father is. He wants every person who is lost to return to him. While the son was still far off, the father was on the lookout and he ran to him as soon as he saw him from far away.



God wants his family to be complete! He wants all sons and daughters to be with him in his house.

God 'runs to us', as it were, by sending Jesus Christ, and He begins with a loving embrace. He welcomes us with open arms.

'My son who was lost is found', and therefore the father immediately throws a party. Bring the food, bring the wine, we must celebrate. Let's eat together.

But eh... sir... your sons is impure. He should go through many rituals in

order to be pure again. You cannot eat with a sinner. You defile yourself.

The father did not care, but as it were he adopted the impurity of his child. For love he allowed himself to be defiled. So that his son could be united with him again. Does this not sound as Gospel?

His son was lost, but now was found, so it was partytime.

For the Pharisees who listened to Jesus telling this parable, this was unacceptable. Never would they, in no circumstances, touch someone who did not abide by all the laws of God. Their own ritual purity was more important than anything for them than bringing people back to the heart of God.

Love for bad people was not there thing. So they just could not appreciate this parable.

2. Two other parables

Before this parable, Jesus told two other parables; first the parable of the lost sheep. A shepherd had 100 sheep, but one was lost.

What does a good shepherd do? Well, he leaves his 99 sheep behind, in the care of someone else, and he personally goes into the wilderness to find that one lost sheep.

We know the story, the shepherd found his lost sheep, and threw a party. The story followed the same storyline as the parable of the prodigal son: the sheep was lost, now it was found, so there had to be a party. He called his friends together and told them, 'rejoice with me'.

And Jesus then explains that story: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance".

Then Jesus told the parable of a lost coin. A woman had a necklace, and a coin fell off. So the woman cleaned her whole house, in order to find that one small coin.

We see the same storyline again. The coin was lost, it then was found, and so the woman rejoiced with her friends.

And again Jesus explained the parable. The heart of the story is: "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

3. Reason why Jesus told these parables

Why did Jesus tell these stories? Because he was criticised by Pharisees and Scribes that he "received sinners and that he was eating with them." This was true. Tax collectors and other bad people were all drawing near to Jesus to hear him. And then he would have dinners with them. Parties.

For the strict upholders of the laws of Israel, the behavior of Jesus was reprehensible: 'You just cannot mix with people who do not perfectly obey every commandment of the law! You cannot relate on a friendly basis with people who refuse to carry the yoke of the laws of God!'

Jesus however warmly received all such people inside his personal space – and He had dinners with them. Those people were ritually unclean according to the laws of Israel, but Jesus warmly embraces them.

Jesus knew of course that the laws were clear in this respect, but he ate with those people anyway. This was not by coincidence. It



did not just happen to him, and it was also not against his will. The opposite is true: He really welcomed these people to himself. “I want to be with you; I want to eat with you.”

Jesus knew that the yoke of the law was too heavy a burden for any person, even for the Pharisees. The law does not give any person the rest he or she needs. That is why Jesus invited people to come to him instead. ‘Take my yoke, and learn from me, for I will give you rest.’

‘Learn from me’. This was precisely what the tax collectors and the sinners, who were with Jesus at the dinner table, were doing. They gathered around Jesus to hear him. They wanted to listen to him, and learn from him, because he was the most attractive, most loving, most kind man they had ever met with.

Please, now think with me.

These sinners wanted to learn from Jesus, Jesus received them, and then they would eat with him.

They were lost, they were received, and then they had a feast because what was lost had been found.

So why did Jesus have these festive meals with these sinners?

Jesus suggests here that he was not eating with those people as a mission method. He eats with them because they had been found. They had returned as the prodigal son returned to the father.

In all three parables, the climax is the feast. And this is what Jesus is saying: ‘I enjoy big meals and feast with these sinners – because they have been saved.’ Jesus is not saying: ‘I welcome them and I feast with them in order that they may be saved.’

He does not eat as an evangelism method – though that would be great as well. But in this case he says: ‘These people were lost, and thanks to God’s love, they have been found, they have come to me, to want to learn from me, and therefore we feast together!’

‘You Pharisees do not want to touch them, but they are the children of God who have returned to the Father and therefore we must celebrate!’

People who are far away from God, they find God if they find Jesus. If they go to him to listen to him and learn from him. If they put their trust in him.

The apostle James, in his letter, says: “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you...” (James 4.8)

When the prodigal was drawing near his father, even before he had fully reached him, the father ran to him. How embarrassing to see that respectable father run to his son! That was against the customs of those days - worthy people do not run! But love is stronger than custom...

God draws near to you if you want to be with him.

If we want to come to God through Jesus Christ, God honors our very first small steps and begins to embrace us, to draw us deeper and deeper into his love, away from our old life of sin and misery and loneliness and being lost.

Jesus Christ, in his earthly life, showed abundantly that he forgave sinners; God our Father also waits with open arms, to cover our sins. We can come to him, because our through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our sins have been dealt with. The way to God is wide open for all people, including you and I.

Be careful, this forgiveness does not come cheaply. We know from the many stories in the Bible about our Lord Jesus Christ, that he received sinners as friends, that he showed them his great love, that forgiveness was available – but he also taught them to change their life.

Jesus made very clear that people had to change. They should stop doing evil, and follow him. In many respects, he agreed with the Pharisees - that people should obey the will of God.

But while the Pharisees threw these ideas as fiery arrows at the people from whom they kept a holy distance, Jesus told people the same truth – but as a loving participant in their lives. Love, grace and forgiveness first, and then change will follow.

Conclusion: What to do?

So what should we do?

First: relax a bit. You may be totally imperfect. You may even have done some truly bad things. But for God you qualify. He is in the business of receiving and embracing anyone who comes to him.

And today we together come to God. He invites us at his table. And you can come as you are.

In the intimacy of that meeting with God, he then does steer you toward change. And one of the major things God asks from us, is that we are just as receptive to all people as He is.

Because God is looking for people, He wants his church to be looking for people. Our mission to care for people comes directly from the character and the heart of God.

May we, as a church, be a loving community, reflecting the behaviour of Jesus, of God. God our Father welcomes all people with real acceptance and love. And so should we.

+ Amen