

With Arms Wide Open
Luke 15:11-32
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
February 17, 2008
Dr. Brent Beasley

What does it mean to offer welcome?

For the month of February we have been focusing together on this theme of Sharing the Bread of Life—our calling to hospitality—our calling to serve as hosts, welcoming the stranger, the outsider, the newcomer, into our fellowship and into the kingdom of God.

We're trying to renew our understanding of evangelism and get in our minds the image of hospitality as a guide for us.

So we have talked a lot about being welcoming. Welcoming others to God's table. And if we're going to talk about being welcoming, we need some kind of model of what God's welcome looks like. The best model we have is that story that we know as the story of the prodigal son.

Those of you who have been here at Second for a long time know that Dr. Jim Hatley, who was pastor here from 1970 – 1987, was famous for his sermons on the prodigal son. In fact, he has a whole book of sermons called *You Can Go Home Again* in which all of the sermons are about the prodigal son.

So any preacher who dares to tackle Luke 15:11-32 here as big shoes to fill. After 4 ½ years, I'm now ready to take it on. And it just so happens that today Dr. Hatley's wife, June, is here. She drove here for the weekend with my mother who is also here. Let's hope I don't crack under the pressure.

So, as I said, most of us have grown up calling this story in Luke 15 that Jesus told about a man and his two sons the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But it's not. Jesus doesn't begin his story by saying, *There once was a man who had a father and an elder brother. . . .*

There once was a man who had two sons, he says, letting us know whom the story is really about. It's about a father who loved his two children with an extravagant love that overpowered everything else—common sense included.

This story is one of three in a row Jesus tells after the Pharisees had taken him to task for hanging out with sinners. Jesus doesn't argue with them. It's not a matter of common sense.

He tells them stories instead: about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep to fend for themselves while he went after one who had wandered off, about a woman who turned her house upside down in order to find one lost coin, and about a compassionate father who dealt lovingly with his two sons.

All three stories address the Pharisees' concern that Jesus is condoning sin by keeping the company he keeps. And all three

stories reply that God is too busy rejoicing over found sheep, rejoicing over found coins, rejoicing over found children, to worry about what they did while they were lost or to worry about what the neighbors will think.

What Jesus is giving us here in this story we'll call today the story of the prodigal father is a picture of the invitation to Salvation. "Prodigal" means reckless, extravagant. That's why we've called the younger son in this story "prodigal."

But I think we need to see that we have a picture here not so much of a prodigal son but a prodigal father.

As you remember, the younger son asked for part of his inheritance early from his father. Under Jewish law a father couldn't just leave his estate however he wanted to whomever he wanted to. The elder son was required to get two-thirds and the younger one-third. One day the younger son went to his father and said, *Dad, I want right now that one-third share I've got coming to me.* And he went off with his inheritance and blew the whole thing on liquor and women and fancy clothes until finally he had nothing left and he had to go to work or starve to death.

He gets a job on a pig farm and stays with it long enough to observe that the pigs might be getting a better deal than he is. And he decides to go home.

He finally came to his senses and decided to come home and beg to be taken back-- not as a son but in the lowest rank of slaves-- the hired servants. So the son sets out on his return trip all the way rehearsing his speech: *Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*

He had no idea how much his father had missed him.

He had no idea the number of times his father had paused between chores to look out the front gate for his son.

The boy had no idea the number of times his father had awakened from a restless sleep, gone into his son's room, and sat on the boy's bed, and prayed that he was alright.

He had no idea that his father was waiting for him to return. Scanning the horizon for any sign of him.

And when he saw him coming down the dusty road and walk across the cattle guard through the gate, the father ran to meet his boy. Tears on his cheeks. His arms outstretched.

And before the boy has time to get even the first word out the old man throws his arms around him and all but knocks him off his feet.

Repentance had been made.
Forgiveness had been given.

Extravagant love had been displayed.

Now there is a third character in this story. The elder brother. The one who stayed and did what he was supposed to. No sooner did the father see the younger son coming down the road than the elder brother's fattened calf was killed and the celebration was on.

The father didn't even wait for the elder son to get home from work. The elder brother came home from the fields, heard the music and dancing, and I'm glad I wasn't the one who had to tell him what it was all about.

He was mad. I'm thinking probably he wasn't so much incensed by his younger brother's return or even by his father's forgiveness of him, but by the celebration. I mean, let him come home, but let him come home to penance not a party.

Where is the moral instruction in a welcome like that? What about facing the consequences of your actions? What about reaping what you sow?

What kind of a world would it be if we all made a practice of rewarding sinners while the God-fearing folk are still out in the fields?

What about those of us who are holding our own?

What about those of us who work hard to keep our jobs and stay in our relationships and take care of our health and pay our bills but never seem to get any credit for it?

What do you have to do to get a party around here?

Do you have to go off and squander your inheritance before you can come home to a party?

Listen, the elder son protests, For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has wasted your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.

But here is where this prodigal father earns his title again. This father with the reckless, extravagant love. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, he doesn't tell his first born to put a lid on it or remind him to honor his father. He knows he has lost both of his sons. Just like our heavenly Father knows the ways he loses us.

He has lost the younger one to a life of recklessness. But he has lost the older one to a more serious fate, to a life of angry self-righteousness that takes him so far away from his father that he might as well be feeding pigs in a far country. He wants his father to love him as he deserves to be loved, because he has obeyed and followed orders and done the right thing.

He wants his father to love him for all that, and his father does love him, but not for any of that, anymore than he loves the younger son for what he has done. He doesn't love either of his sons according to what they deserve. He just loves them-- more because of who he is than because of who they are.

And the elder brother can't stand it. Have you ever felt like this? He can't stand a love that transcends right and wrong, a love that gives him no credit, a love that throws homecoming parties for prodigal sinners and expects the hard-working righteous to rejoice.

He can't stand it so he stands outside-- refusing his father's invitation to join the party. But again, the father turns out to be a prodigal too, at least as far as his love is concerned. He never seems to tire of giving it away. It seems that he will never run out.

Son, he says, reclaiming his older son, you are always with me, and all that's mine is yours.

He loves both. The younger one's recklessness cannot deflect his love, and neither can the elder one's righteousness. They are a family, and a party for one is a party for all.

We had to celebrate and rejoice, the loving father says to his older son, because this brother of yours-- not my son but your brother-- was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.

[I am greatly indebted in this sermon to Barbara Brown Taylor's re-telling of this story in the chapter "The Prodigal Father" in her book The Preaching Life]

So I was reading Dr. Hatley's book of sermons on the prodigal son, and he ends one of his sermons by saying something like this.

At this point Jesus' parable breaks off, and well it should. Because, remember, parables are stories that have a way of becoming mirrors. Their purpose is to disarm and get behind our defenses and show us things about ourselves we have never seen before.

You can't help but wonder what happened that day when Jesus told this parable. Did the tax collectors and sinners see themselves in the image of the prodigal son and realize they were loved and come to themselves and resolve to rise up and go to their father? Did the Pharisees see themselves in the face of the elder brother and realize that they, too, were loved and for once did they come on in and eat with the others and enjoy the music?

Those are interesting historical speculations, but this morning they are beside the point. Like I said, parables have a way of becoming mirrors, for us too. What do you see in the mirror when you hear this story?

Do you see that God has two kinds of children: prodigals and Pharisees? Arrogant wasters and self-righteous straight-arrows. In what part of this family portrait do you find your likeness? It is important that you answer that. But it is even more important that you realize that either way you are loved. It makes no difference whether you are limping in from the far country, having wasted it all in riotous living, or doing a slow burn out in the dark of self-righteousness. You are still loved. There is hope for you. And a party.

And so Dr. Hatley asks us in his sermon to decide whether we see in the mirror of this story the prodigal son or the elder brother looking back at us. I would add now another question. In what way can you also see when you look in the mirror that third character, the loving father? Do you see in yourself his loving, accepting embrace?

That's what we're talking about this month—our taking on that role of the ones who welcome, the ones who forgive, the ones who make another place at the table, modeling ourselves after that loving Father who first welcomed us.

In his short story "The Capital of the World," Ernest Hemingway tells the story of a Spanish father and his teenage son. The relationship between this father and son became strained and eventually shattered. The rebellious son—whose name was Paco, a common Spanish name—ran away from home. After some time, his father began a long and arduous search to find him.

As a last resort the exhausted father placed an ad in a Madrid newspaper, hoping that his son would see the ad and respond to it. The ad read: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN. LOVE PAPA.

As Hemingway tells the story, Tuesday at noon in front of the Hotel Montana, there were 800 Pacos, all waiting for their fathers. The authorities had to muster a whole squad of police to contain the crowd.

To the 800 Pacos all around us and among us secretly yearning for a chance at restoration, reconciliation, forgiveness, grace, a fresh start, God says, and we say with him, *Welcome*.

No exceptions. No exceptions.

With arms wide open.