

## WELCOME. I LOVE YOU. NOW LEAVE

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout 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 to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up 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 like one of your hired hands.’” So he set off and went to his father.

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then 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 slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! 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 might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32, NRSV

The story of Jesus we read this morning invites us to a family get-together. Like all family reunions, there are some difficult interactions; you may know the kind I’m talking about. Whether it is at Thanksgiving, Christmas, a birthday or an anniversary, when the family comes around, there are family members you are happy to see and those few that you are less than happy to see. For this latter group, you find yourself clenching your teeth into a stiff smile that does not involve your eyebrows raising at all. Your words say, “Welcome! I love you!” But your body language says, “Now leave!” Social niceties and family harmony both demand politeness, but inside you are counting the seconds until you no longer have to be around this annoying person. Welcome. I love you. Now leave.

Jennifer and I watch together every Christmas the movie *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. It portrays good old Clark Griswold trying to have a "Norman Rockwell" type of Christmas at home with his wife and children, but then the family shows up. Cousin Eddie drives up in his rat trap of an RV with his family. Eddie barely bathes, and he is uncouth, embarrassing and not invited for Christmas. This is the same cousin Eddie who empties the RV--well you know what needs to be emptied out of an RV--into the storm drain out front. The same cousin Eddie who stands out on the front lawn in the morning drinking a beer in his long johns. Eddie is not alone, however, Clark has more family members to deal with. There's the uncle who sets the Christmas tree on fire, and the aunt who's more than a little out of it and wraps up her pet cat as a Christmas present. There's the mother-in-law who's tipsy all the time and the father-in-law criticizing every move Clark makes. That's the Griswold family Christmas get-together. Welcome. I love you. Now leave.

Most of us have a number of people that we are forced to act polite towards, but whom we really don't want around. Why? Well there are lots of reasons why. Usually it's about some old score that needs to be settled, some old wrong that was never righted, some old problem that has never gone away. The bitterness sits there like some sort of tumor growing inside of us, growing larger over the years. Bitter. Bitter. Bitter. We pretend it's not there until that someone crosses our path at the store, at the pharmacy, the doctor's office, maybe even at church. Then we have to grit our teeth and pretend as if we like that person, while the whole time we are thinking, "Welcome. I love you. Now leave."

We find the same sort of situation happening in today's scripture passage. This parable is often titled "The Prodigal Son", but some say it's "The Story of the Loving Father" who waits and welcomes home this lost son. Perhaps it's the story of The Bitter Older Son who's always done what's right and is angered to discover that this good-for-nothing brother is back in town and his sap of a father has thrown the ungrateful lout a welcome home party. Bitter. Bitter. Bitter. This bitter older brother and son can't even manage to say, "Welcome," or "I love you." He's skipped ahead to the "Now leave." He won't even go in to the celebration and pretend to be happy to see his long-lost brother. You've got to at least respect him for not being two-faced, I guess, but he remains outside away from the party, too bitter to go in.

You can view this parable from a lot of different ways depending on where you are in your life. You might be the lost child who has made mistakes, and insulted your father, mother, and loved ones. In those days, inheritances were not split evenly. The first son got the most and the rest was split between the other children. So the oldest son would have gotten at least two thirds of the old man's wealth and property, while the second son had to look forward to working for his father like a slave until one day--even though he's worked just as hard as his older brother—he receives at most a third of his father's wealth.<sup>1</sup> So he said to his father, "I'm not really willing to wait until you die, go ahead and give me my part. Why should I wait and work like a slave and get less than my brother?" Bitter. Bitter. Bitter. He essentially said to this father, "You might as well go ahead and die now, because all I care about is my share of the family fortune."

Some of you may be like the father. You've been wounded and hurt, maybe even by your own children. It is worth noting the way this passage describes the father dividing up his property between his sons. The translation I read today says "property," but the Greek word here is *bios*, the word from which we get biology, "the study of life." The father divided up his *bios*. The father divided up his life.<sup>2</sup> He amputated part of himself to let his child go, and he has been waiting for that lost part of himself to return.

Or maybe you're the good child and you've been the one doing it right all your life. Why should anybody else get a break when they've messed up? They've screwed up, why should they be forgiven? You're the one, after all, who has been doing it right all these years, but does anybody throw a party for you? Where is your reward

for being the good child, the good worker, and the one who stayed to do the right thing when others flew the coop? Bitter. Bitter. Bitter. Welcome. I love you. Now leave.

Both of these sons are trapped by their bitterness. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, preaching professor and writer, says of them, "Both sons suffer from the illusion that they can be in relationship with their father without being related to each other."<sup>3</sup> The younger son/brother gives no thought to how his actions will leave his older brother short-handed caring for the family property or how his brother will feel when he returns. The older brother, likewise, gives no thought to his brother's plight. When his father comes out to speak with him, he speaks of "your son" and not of "my brother." Similarly, we often operate as if our relationship with God is distinct and separate from our relationships with others, as if we can be okay with God even though we remain bitter at others. Our relationship with God involves our relationships with other people, and when our welcome and our love is not real, neither is the welcome we give to God or the love we offer to God in our own lives. When our lives are filled with bitterness, we leave less room for God.

Thankfully, even the little room we leave for God is enough for grace to work inside of us. Both sons stood at a distance from their father: one son went off to a far country; the other son stood away from the party. Both were bitter, but do you notice who went to whom? The father covered the distance between himself and his sons. When the lost son is still far off, the loving father runs out to embrace him. When the son who has been loyal is outside of the party and will not come in, it is the father that goes out to talk to him. So also does God come to us, welcoming us, urging us to come back in, lay that bitterness aside and join the party.

Tom Long, another preaching professor and writer, tells a story passed along from one of his students.

A student of mine went jogging with his father in their urban neighborhood. As they ran, the son shared what he was learning in seminary about urban ministry, and the father, an inner city pastor, related experiences of his own. At the halfway point in their jog, they decided to phone ahead for a home-delivered pizza. As they headed for the phone, however, a homeless man approached them, asking for spare change. The father reached into the pockets of his sweat pants and pulled out two handfuls of coins. "Here," he said to the homeless man. "Take what you need."

The homeless man, hardly believing his good fortune, said, "I'll take it all," scooped the coins into his own hands, and went on his way.

It only took a second for the father to realize that he now had no change for the phone. "Pardon me," he beckoned to the homeless man. "I need to make a call. Can you spare some change?"

The homeless man turned and held out the two handfuls of coins. "Here," he said. "Take what you need."<sup>4</sup>

When it comes down to it, we are all beggars. All of us have done things that--if we're honest--we regret. All of us have hurt other people. All of us have done things that we're ashamed of, whether we think we were the good child or not--we all stand in need of forgiveness and the grace of God. The question is, if we will acknowledge that truth about ourselves, are we willing to allow that same grace and forgiveness to those who have hurt us?

On the front of your bulletin, there is a quotation by Henri Nouwen, which makes this point well.

Maybe the reason it seems hard for me to forgive others is that I do not fully believe that I am a forgiven person. If I could fully accept the truth that I am forgiven and do not have to live in guilt or shame, I would really be free. My freedom would allow me to forgive others seventy times seven times. By not forgiving, I chain myself to a desire to get even, thereby losing my freedom.<sup>5</sup>

I am most able to forgive when I remember I have been forgiven. I'm least able to forgive when I cannot forgive myself. I've been in churches all my life and some of the bitterest people I've ever known are ones walking around in church buildings. (Not here at our church, of course, but elsewhere.) I think about them and have to say that Nouwen's quote applies to them. They were the people that were hardest on themselves, the least willing to believe they could be forgiven, so they were also the ones least willing to offer that forgiveness to others. When we realize we are beggars unable to save ourselves, forgive ourselves, then suddenly we are more able to give to those who come begging to us. We unclench our teeth, we can say, Welcome. I love you." and we aren't watching the clock waiting for them to leave.

Dave Tushaus, our moderator, shared a story this week with me, one he heard from Tony Campolo. Campolo is an American Baptist minister, social activist and also a college professor. I've heard Campolo speak probably about a dozen times and I won't be able to tell the story like he does. Campolo is probably now retirement age, but I saw him back when he was middle-aged. It was always at a big conference, and they would zoom in on his face in order to project his image on big screens. Campolo, who was balding then, always had flop sweat coming down, because he was so into his stories. The stories were great and told with his thick Philadelphia accent. I won't try to replicate the accent, but I will do my second-rate best to tell it as he would.<sup>6</sup>

This particular story, Campolo calls "Agnes' Birthday." He says, "I went to Honolulu to speak at a conference. I was all out whack from flying out there and couldn't sleep when I got to the hotel. So, at three o'clock in the morning, I finally got up and went out for a walk and the only place I could find open was this grungy, greasy spoon of an all-night diner. I walked in ready for an early breakfast of bacon and eggs and this grungy, greasy cook walks up.

"What do you want?"

Campolo relates, "I became less hungry. I saw a donut under some glass, so I ordered the donut and a cup of coffee. I figured I would eat that and get on my way, but while I'm sitting there at the counter, the door flies open and a bunch of women walk in and they're all gabbing and talking to each other. I realized by the way they were dressed these were "business women"--if you know what I mean. They were coming off their shift talking to one another about the Johns they had been with that night, about their pimps, and about what money they made. They all were gathered around me at the counter. I was sitting there drinking my coffee and eating my donut thinking I gotta get out of here quick!

"But I overheard one of them talking to another and she says, 'You know tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39.'"

"One of the other girls says, 'What are you telling me for, Agnes? You want me to throw you a birthday party?'"

"Agnes says defensively, "I wasn't asking you to do that, besides no one has ever thrown me a birthday party in my whole life.'"

They keep talking, but now Campolo was inspired. The ladies finally leave, so he says to the greasy, grungy cook, whose name turns out to be Harry, “Hey, who was that, the one who said she was having a birthday tomorrow?”

Harry says warily, “It was Agnes.”

Campolo says, “Hi, I’m Tony. I want you and me to do something.”

Harry asks, “What do you want?”

“Let’s throw Agnes a birthday party. She said no one has ever done that for her in her whole life. Do they come here every night after they get off work?”

Harry, confused, says, “Yeah.”

“Let’s throw her a birthday party at this time tomorrow night!”

Campolo goes on to describe how Harry calls to his wife and says, “Hey, this guy out here is crazy. He wants to throw Agnes a birthday party.”

The wife says, “Oh, that’s great, I’ll bake a cake.”

So they make plans. Tony describes what happened the next night. “I show up with crepe paper and a cardboard sign that reads, ‘Happy Birthday Agnes.’ Together we decorate and other customers are joining in and getting in on the act. When the ladies finally walk in, they all yell, ‘Happy Birthday Agnes!’ They all start singing Happy Birthday at 3:30 in the morning for a prostitute at a greasy spoon diner.

“They bring out the cake and Harry says, ‘Here Agnes blow out the candles!’

“Agnes has tears streaming down her face and she is so emotional that she can’t speak. Harry doesn’t know what to do. He looks over at Tony for help but finds none. ‘Blow it out Agnes,’ he tries again.

“Agnes finds her voice and squeaks, ‘Do I have to? It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Can I take it home?’

“Harry looks at Tony. Tony looks at Harry and shrugs. Agnes takes that as permission, so she says, ‘I’ll be right back. It’s just the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life, I’ll be right back. I’m just going to take it home, so I can keep it and look at it, you know.’

“She leaves the diner and everyone is standing around under the crepe paper. They don’t know what to do or what to say. So Tony says, ‘Why don’t we pray for Agnes? We will ask for God to help her and give her a happy birthday.’”

So he leads them in prayer. They’re all so stunned that they go along with it. Harry the cook walks up after the prayer is over and with some accusation in his voice says, “Hey, you didn’t tell me you was a minister, what kind of church do you go to?”

Tony says, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.”

Harry says, “No you don’t. There ain’t no church like that. Because if there was a church like that, I’d join it. Yep I would join it.”

Amen

Rev. Chase Peeples

Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO

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<sup>1</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, IX, Nashville: Abingdon, 301.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Table Manners," in *The Christian Century*, March 11, 1998, 257. You can read this essay on-line at: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=644>

<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Surprise Party," in *The Christian Century*, March 14, 2001, 10. You can read this essay on-line at: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2168>

<sup>5</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: a Spiritual Journey*, New York: Doubleday, 1988, 68.

<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, there is no authoritative version of this story. Campolo has told it in many settings and there are a number of versions that have been passed on. The version I am working off of and even paraphrasing a bit can be found on-line at: <http://www.swapmeetdave.com/Bible/Agnes.htm>