

Seeds of Welcome

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Across my Presbyterian Facebook universe, colleagues this week have been preparing sermons on the parable of the Prodigal Son, which we have just heard. It is as iconic as it gets. On one hand, the preaching question to be asked is what more can be said? On the other hand, because it is so iconic, the preaching question to be asked is what new facet can we discover some 2000 years into its telling?

For one thing, let's note what sets this all up. Jesus was drawing crowds larger and larger in size, including tax collectors and sinners, outcasts, social undesirables, clearly not the "right" people. And the "right" people, the scribes and Pharisees, the religious authorities, took great notice and took great exception. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Welcoming, and eating, eating, and welcoming, two of the things the church does best, when it is at its best, and when it is not at its best, two of the things we are most challenged to do. Welcoming, and eating, and even more so, eating as a form of welcoming, whether it be at the Lord's Table or the meal we share with our neighbors on a Saturday morning or the lunch we will share at noon today during our annual meeting.

Welcoming, and eating. How are we doing? And how are we doing based on Jesus' benchmark versus the benchmark of social convention and appropriateness. And more so, because the welcoming river flows in many directions, how are we doing with our own sense of welcome, or, in Paul Tillich's terminology, in "accepting that we are accepted." My hunch is that we will do better in welcoming others as we embrace in ever deeper levels our own welcome, which is always part of the faith journey.

So Jesus hears the grumblings, which are building as we move ever closer to Palm Sunday and Holy Week. And rather than offer a lecture, or engage in a debate (because we all know how wonderful debates can be!), Jesus tells a story. A story!

We've just heard it, so I won't repeat it. But do rehearse it sometime soon. Note, as with any beautiful short story, the details, the nuances. Note, in just a few verses, the compelling plotline, the extraordinary character development. Perhaps because many of us have heard this since Sunday school days we have filled in details, narrative nuances. And that's OK.

I bet we know these three characters – the father and the two sons. Perhaps we relate with one or the other or the other. Perhaps we've related to any of them, or all of them, at different points in our lives. Perhaps we've traveled to that distant country, made the choices we've made, and come to new discoveries about ourselves. Perhaps we've stayed home, been dutiful, but in doing so discovered things about ourselves as well, feelings, toward our brother (whoever that may be) or ourselves or a parent or other authority figure. Or perhaps we've been the father, or a father figure, who loves, in this case, both his children and is baffled by each of them and therefore wracked by his own behavior. Why did the one son run away? Why did the other son not run away? What did I do, have I done, to either promote or discourage any of this behavior, and what do I feel about myself when I look in the mirror.

In fact, many commentators have renamed this parable the parable of the welcoming father. That's fine with me, because it connects with the set-up – remember, this man welcomes and eats with tax collectors and sinners.

What happens when we place ourselves in each of the characters' shoes? The beleaguered father. The son who goes to the distant country. The son who stays home, bitterly and begrudgingly. And what must we do, what is our calling, to get to the place where we are all present, fully present, at that party, that great feast?

It seems clear from the set-up and the larger sweep of the narrative that Jesus, or Jesus as God's incarnational stand-in, is the welcoming father. But I wonder if there are not moments when we take on that role as well. Our welcome can never be as full and complete as God's, but nonetheless we are called to welcome, and welcome without prejudice. We could easily list ten topics right now – Black Lives Matter, immigration, bullying, anti-poverty, equal pay, and on and on, where lack of welcome is the norm, instances when culture has established parameters that have left some in and some out. How do we become stand-ins for God's unconditional, welcoming presence? How do we set the table for a hospitable feast in the midst of a culture that works so hard to divide and divide and divide again?

We are not God, by any means, but are we not called to be God's welcoming presence?

We need to be careful not to equate those who have been shut out with the son traveling to a distant country. By no means. I am simply saying that the ongoing dynamics of community and welcome and inclusion and embrace is fluid, and always our responsibility to consider.

And it happens not only beyond the church, but inside it. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is approximately 91% white; our society is approximately 62% white, and we are moving to a time when there is no majority racial group. What does welcome look like in that instance?

Or what does welcome look like when we ourselves are the unwelcome ones, because of things we've said or done, or because of who we perceive ourselves to be? That is reality as well, those moments when we look at ourselves in the mirror, when we take stock, and wonder.

That is the remarkable nature of this story. Whether it is a demanding ethic that calls us to welcome all, or pastoral tenderness that reminds us of our own welcome, God's love reaches us – the ones who travel far off or the ones who stay at home.

Scott Hoezee writes that "For the Son of God was eating with the very last, least, and lost souls who needed to know more than anybody that the God in heaven above whom Jesus represented was a God of generous joy who is enthusiastic about our lives and eager to throw one party after the next for every bedraggled sheep, lost coin, or lost son who shows up on the front porch of God's heart to say, 'Still got room at the table for me?'"

That is our good news to receive, and our good news to share. That yes, there is room at the table, for you, for me, for all of God's beloved children. Let the welcoming, and the eating, continue. Amen.