



Christ United Methodist Church

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Date: March 31, 2019

Sermon: Who Do We Welcome?

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Speaker: Pastor Don Archer

The fifteenth chapter of Luke begins with Jesus being criticized for doing what many of us would consider important ministry. *Welcoming sinners and eating with them.* Some of us believe that this might be an appropriate mission statement for the church. *Welcoming sinners and eating with them.* The established religious community, identified as the Pharisees and the scribes, thought it was inappropriate and offensive behavior for a rabbi. They were grumbling about it so Jesus told them a parable. A parable that begins with this line: *There was a man who had two sons.* From those opening words, we know that this story is going to be a tragedy.

The parable that follows is most commonly referred to as *The Prodigal Son.* The word, *prodigal*, is a reference to reckless or irresponsible spending of wealth/money ... which we soon learn the youngest son was guilty of. I have proposed some alternate titles for this parable.

The Lost Son, The Loving Father, The Big Party, The Pod Eating Pigs, The Unfortunate Well-Nourished Calf, The Lucky Goat, Fashion Trends of the Lost & Desperate.

All of these are based on the parable that someone, somewhere, decided should be called *The Prodigal Son.* I would guess that the parable of the Prodigal Son and the Parable of the Good Samaritan are probably the two most familiar of Jesus' parables. We know the general theme, if not specific details, of the story. We know that there was a young, foolish son, who takes his share of his inheritance, goes to a distant country, squanders his money in debaucherist living, ends up with a job feeding pigs and envying their food. He decides to return to his father, not as a son, but as hired servant.

Upon seeing his son, in the distance, his father runs out to greet him, hugs/kisses, rejoices. The young son **confesses** that he has sinned against God and his father and is no longer deserving to be called his son.

The father responds by calling for the best robe, a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. Further, he insists that a party, complete with veal, be held with music and dancing. Chance the Rapper comes over and things get jumpin'

Meanwhile ... out in the field, doing all the work, is the oldest son. He comes back to the house and as he approaches he hears the music and dancing. He asks one of the servants: *What's going on?* Your brother is home and we are celebrating his return. He became angry and refuses to go in. His father comes out and pleads with him to join the party. He answers: *I have been loyal to you all my*

life, I have been obedient to you, and yet you never gave me so much as a goat so that I could party with my friends. But this son of yours comes draggin' his carcass in here and you throw him a party with the best food!!

The father explains that *all that he has belongs to him. You have always been with me, and always will be. Be we **have to celebrate** because your brother was dead and is come to life; he was lost and has been found.*

That's where the story ends. We are not told what happened next. Did the older son and younger son reconcile? Did the younger son relapse and go back to his irresponsible ways? That is left up to our imagination and interpretation. There are more layers to this parable than your Italian grandmother's lasagna. Every time I read it, I hear, see, discover, something new.

This morning, I want to go back to the reason that Jesus told this parable in the first place. *Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. **So he told them this parable:***

The question before us is precisely this. *Who do we welcome and with whom do we eat?* At Christ Church, who is welcome? Our outdoor sign says EVERYONE. With whom do we eat? Last Friday Sandy and I went to the St. Marys Fish Fry. We have lived in the Marietta area for 300 years and this was our first time. Right away I discovered that there were a lot of non-Catholic people there. I could tell this because many of them were Christ Church people! I recognized people from other UM churches and I noticed that there were some people there who do not attend any church and dwell in a distant country. The place was full of younger sons and daughters and older sons and daughters. Sinners, saints and in-betweeners all gathered to eat, not veal, but fish. Fish ... the early sign or symbol of those who followed Jesus. I didn't hear any music and I didn't see any dancing but there were bursts of laughter and a constant murmur of conversation. It was wonderful. All for \$9.00 (senior discount).

I have been thinking about that fish fry all week. I have been asking myself why the Church can't be more like what we witnessed on Friday? Why can't Sunday morning look more like that Lenten dinner? What would it take? Would we be comfortable with such a gathering or would we **grumble** about truly welcoming everyone and eating with anyone? Our answers say a great deal about how we respond to the grace of God.

Like the son who feels undeserving or the son who is offended by it?

I believe that our mission, our calling, as a church, as individual disciples, is to go out and **plead** with those who have not joined the party, the celebration of God's grace, and *encourage* them to come in, enjoy the food, the music, the dancing, the recognition that all that are lost are always welcome home. God's very kingdom is open to us. All of us.

To celebrate this and to remind ourselves of God's grace, I'm going to ask that we take on the role of the loving father in the parable. Stand, turn to someone near you (or across the sanctuary) and say to each other: ***In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven.** If you are particularly bold, you may also give them a hug. Don't kiss anyone unless you ask permission first and then only on the cheek.*

Thank you. We had to do this, to celebrate and rejoice, because we were dead and have been given new life, we were lost and have been found. Amen.