

Welcome Home!

A sermon based on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 and *The Gift of New Creation* by Thomas L. Ehrich

When Reverend Sue titled this sermon “Welcome Home!”, I was certain she was going to talk about the parable of the prodigal son. It’s hard not to. We all love this story, this story full of grace and welcome that makes us marvel at the love of God. Thomas L. Ehrich, in the book that our sermon series is drawn from, *The Gift of New Creation*, uses this story to remind us again that our ways are not God’s ways, that God welcomes those who we, in our self-righteousness, would not. It’s a beautiful, convicting thought.

But Sue also could have been talking about the passage from Joshua. It does, after all, describe the Israelites when they first come into the land that will become their home, the land that God has promised them and has led them to, after a long forty years of trial in the wilderness. That too is a hopeful story for us, and Ehrich points that out. With the end of the manna, a new era had begun. An era, you could say, of homecoming.

Now, I love a good story of homecoming and grace as much as the next person. These stories give us examples that help us grow in grace and in our understanding of God, something we do throughout much of the year, especially during the long season of ordinary time that comes between Pentecost and Advent. But that’s not the season we’re in right now. We’re in Lent. Lent is our season of self-examination and repentance, a season that’s been practiced over the history of the church, one that the selectors of the lectionary would have had in mind when they picked these texts. Though we have trust in God’s grace, this is a season of wilderness, not arrival.

So why do we hear these texts now?

Well, I have an idea about that. I think it has to do with what happens just before we arrive home. But before I begin to explain, would you pray with me?

God of the Wilderness and God of the Home, thank you for bringing us to this time and place. Be with us here today. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Amen. So let’s start with the story of the Prodigal Son. We all know what happens—a kid gets his inheritance early, spends all his money, ends up at rock bottom and is welcomed back home by his father—but where does this story fit in Luke’s gospel story about Jesus? Well, there were some Pharisees who were concerned about how many tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus and they start to grumble about it. “Look at this guy. Sitting down and eating with *those people*.”

Jo Schonewolf, preached at Salem UMC, 03-31-19

So Jesus, being Jesus, decides to tell a couple of parables in response. He says, “Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost, then brings his friends together to rejoice when he’s found it? Amen amen, I tell you, there’s more rejoicing in heaven over a sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Then he says, “Or what woman, having lost that day’s paycheck, wouldn’t turn her house upside down looking for it, and then bring her friends together to celebrate when it’s found? Amen amen, I tell you, the angels rejoice over every sinner who repents.”

And these stories seem like the story of the prodigal son. Sinners, you’re welcome. Self-righteous people, check yourself. It seems like a fair response to the Pharisees and I think we all like hearing it. We all like it when the self-righteous get their just deserts (except when we’re being self-righteous). Regardless, the moral of the story is that it’s better to be a repentant sinner than a self-righteous jerk.

But these are funny stories Jesus tells. They don’t make much sense when you think about them. “Who among you wouldn’t leave your ninety-nine sheep and go looking for the lost one?”

Well... all of us.

If you leave those ninety-nine sheep alone, they are going to graze your field to pieces. Plus, some of them are going to wander off on their own as well. We don’t think about this, because we’re not shepherds, but sheep can be dumb and obstinate and they’ll gorge themselves to death if you let them graze too long in the wrong place. That’s why they need a shepherd AT ALL TIMES. Going off after one lost sheep just doesn’t make any sense.

And that woman, who loses the coin worth a day’s wages. She just lost at least a day of work in order to find something that she never should have lost. If I misplaced \$160 (before taxes) and spent a whole day looking for it, I would not be celebrating with my friends. I would be pretty ashamed.

And the father, in the Prodigal Son story, what he does doesn’t make any sense either. Why on earth would you give a third of your estate to your younger son before your death? You need him there, helping you run the farm, not liquidating a third of your assets to go off and do as he pleases. Honestly, the elder brother in the story has a real point here. He’s already made life harder for the whole family by taking off. To welcome him back literally with open arms after everything he’s done seems like a poor decision.

This is, of course, the Pharisees have been saying all along. It’s not that they’re being judgmental for no reason—they have good reasons for judgement. The people who are responding to Jesus are people who have hurt other people, people who do things that damage

other people, and people who steal wealth to pad their own pockets. They are not the kind of people that you want to be in community with. The people that Jesus is eating with have shown their capacity for harm and it is wise to be wary of them. The Pharisees have a point.

In fact, Jesus has some explaining to do if he's going to welcome in all of these sinners. He needs to have a plan for assuring that they're not going to come into our community and run amok. The shepherd can go off in search of the lost sheep, but he needs to make sure someone's there to watch the ninety-nine while he's gone. The woman can turn her whole house upside down looking for a lost coin, as long as her friends are going to help her put it back together. And the father can welcome back his lost son, as long as there's some assurance that he's not going to run off again and leave everything in ruins.

See, the only way these stories make sense is if they're not the whole story. The only way they make sense is if there's community and repentance.

And Jesus knows that. That's why he tells the story of the prodigal son to both the Pharisees and the sinners. To the Pharisees, he says, "I hear you. There's a real danger here. But I'm going to bring these people into our community anyway, because I believe that they will change their ways and we'll be better for it." To the sinners, he says, "This only works if you change your ways."

Because remember, it wasn't the generation that left Egypt that got to go to the Promised Land.

It was the generation that was born in the wilderness, the generation fed on God's manna from heaven, who knew that the only way forward was God's way. That generation saw the struggles of their forebears. They heard the stories of Egypt and saw the pain those who had been there carried. They saw that, no matter how hard they tried, their parents could never quite leave Egypt behind them. This generation lived the hard wilderness life, but it was that wilderness generation who realized that they had to get right with God. They covenanted with God and set up twelve stones in remembrance. Through circumcision, they marked their bodies with that covenant. And after all these things, God says to them, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt."

And Ehrlich says something beautiful in talking about this passage. He says, "God set their disgrace aside, and now so could they." No longer were any of the Israelites bound by the disgrace of slavery that had been forced upon them. No longer were any of the Israelites bound by the disgrace and regret of following their own way instead of God's. All of that was set aside and something new could begin, all because the wilderness generation changed their ways, turning away from the ways of their forebears.

Jesus set aside the disgrace of the people he ate with so that something new could begin in their lives. Jesus set aside our disgrace too, so something new could begin in us.

These stories remind us of the way God is working in our lives throughout our lives. God gives us manna in the wilderness of our lives. And manna can look like phone calls from friends and loved ones when our life is falling apart, the support of a church community when the bills aren't going to be paid or food isn't going to be put on the table, or visits and prayers in the hospital that make all the difference in the world in a difficult time. God stays with us through our wilderness until we are back where we were always meant to be and then God is with us in different ways. The manna is gone, but there's still food to eat before us.

God is with us when we hit rock bottom, like the prodigal son or the people who were eating with Jesus. God nudges us until we come to ourselves and realize that there's a home for us to go back to and God is there to welcome us back with open arms when we arrive. God is even with us when we've been in community for years and years and look with suspicion at those new sinners God is welcoming back.

These stories remind us of the way that God is with us, but the reason we hear these stories during Lent is repentance.

God rolls away our disgrace and welcomes us into the promised land, into the good life, but only when we realize that we need to live differently.

God is waiting to welcome us back home with open arms after we've gone astray, but the only way for our return *to stick* is to have a change of heart.

Lent is our time to look at ourselves and see what we need to change in order to be the people that God wants us to be, the people who can come home and stay home. Because while God is always willing to welcome us back home, it's up to us to want to be there. It's up to us to leave Egypt behind and live in the Promised Land. It's up to us to decide what needs to be nailed to the cross on Good Friday so that we can have new life on Easter Sunday.

Because this, our life together in church as members of Christ's body, this only works if we change our ways.

And thanks be to God that we can.

Amen.