

March 14, 2010

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

Sermon: "Seek Your True Home"

Our Scripture today is well known and is a favorite for many of us. It seems to sum up the very principles of God's love and God's grace, not in huge theological terms but in simple gestures: the exuberant hug from the father, the tears of joy of discovering that the younger son is home, and the huge celebration feast. It reminds that when we find and experience God's grace and God's love in our lives, it is the best homecoming ever. When we come home to our true home, dwelling in God's presence, We feel embraced. We feel loved. We know that we are accepted for who we are, just as we are. God's grace is like a homecoming, a homecoming that many of us have searched for in our lives, want in our lives, need in our lives. We want this feeling of security, this feeling of homecoming because we sometimes feel that there is this gaping hole in our lives. And we try to fill that hole with stuff, with other relationships, with questions. And yet, after trying to fill that hole, we feel more empty, more lost, more alone than ever before.

As we journey through life, take our faith journeys, we realize that we need a true home. We want a true home. Deep down, in the very core of our being, we need to know that we are embraced, loved, accepted, welcome, just as we are, for who we are. And that's what we found and continue to find when we experience God's grace in our lives. Homecoming, Welcome, Acceptance, Love.

That's why we love this story so much. It reminds us that all we have to do is go home to God's loving arms once more. It reminds us that when we wander and stray that God is waiting for us, hoping for our return. It reminds us that when we begin to make that long journey back home that God runs to us, silences our confessions, and says "that's not important. What is important is that what was once lost is now found, once what was thought dead is alive."

It's the unabashed welcome that the father gives to the younger son that reminds us of the first time we felt God's grace in our lives. It's the loving invitation that the father gives to the older son as well that reminds us that we are claimed and named as God's Beloved. It's the homecoming. It's being enfolded in love. It's that voice soothing us and reassuring us by simply saying, "Here is where you belong." That's God's grace. That's God's welcome. That's our true home.

We can relate to this story because we see ourselves in the characters of the sons. At some point in our lives, we have been the younger son, searching, itching for adventure, turning away from home because we think that there has got to be something more to life than this home has to offer. At some point in our lives, we have been the older son, working hard each day, frustrated because it seems like the work we do is not appreciated, we feel like we are being taken for granted simply because we stayed. We can relate because we have been there. We have wandered and have gotten lost. We stayed and wondered why we stayed. We have experienced the ups and downs of life. We experienced the searching and the staying. All the while looking for our true home, needing to feel that WELCOME, wanting to be embraced. And in the end, either way, searching or staying, we realized that all we had done was to separate

ourselves from God. We felt lost. We felt far away from home. We felt lonely. We felt the darkness creeping in and we didn't have the security or shelter of God's arms.

And the Good News is that the welcome comes to both sons. The father welcomes home the one searching just as much as he welcomes the one who stayed. There was no price to pay, no penitence, no creeds to say, no rites or rituals to make the relationship whole once more. It was simply when the sons came to the father, when they pointed themselves toward home, the father's welcome was unleashed. And that's the good news for us as people of faith. No matter where we roam, no matter if we stay, when we turn home, turn ourselves to God, re-orient ourselves to God then "we bring ourselves into range of God's love, which sets us free, but will wait and watch and hope for our return" when we wander again. God's Welcome is full of grace. God's Welcome is full of love. God's Welcome is full of acceptance, just as we are, for who we are, because we are all precious in his sight. God's Welcome is unending, unlimited, and there for all of God's children.

Because from the very beginning, we were created to be at home in God. Because we were created to be home with God. Because we were created to find our home in God. Our True Home.

In our Scripture, Jesus is laying it on thick. Just when we think this story can get more scandalous, Jesus throws us a curveball. It starts out: This man had two sons...simple enough until the younger son demands his inheritance now, basically saying I want what is mine when you are dead. And if that wasn't bad enough, he makes his father sell his land, land that has been in his family for generations, land that was given to God's people when they crossed into the promise land, land that was forbidden by Jewish law to sell. And then if that wasn't bad enough, he goes off into a foreign country with Gentiles, and spends all the money and ends up disgracing his family even more by feeding pigs, animals that were unclean according to Jewish law. This is SCANDAL with a capital S.

And the father welcomes him home, not dignified, not demanding restitution, not making the son earn his respect once more. No, this father goes running down the drive, arms outstretched, weeping tears of joy. Not proper behavior for a patriarch. This is another SCANDAL with a capital S.

And then the older son comes in as says, "Look dad, it's all good that you welcomed him back home but what am I chopped liver. You need to make him pay. If he comes home, make him wear sackcloth and wear ashes on his head. If he comes home, there has got to be some restitution. And if he comes home, then I deserve more because I've stayed here, working for you, done all that you asked of me. That's the way things work. 2+2 always equal 4. There are always winners and losers. There are always those who get more than others because they worked more and they earned it.

And then the father says "Nope, my welcome doesn't work that way. There is more than enough to go around. In my welcome, 2+2 equals 100. In my welcome, there are not losers and winners, just my children that I love. In my welcome, there is no way you can earn it. It is freely given.

And to the crowd that Jesus is speaking and to us as readers, this is the biggest SCANDAL of them all. What do you mean the father welcomes the son home without punishment? What do you mean that the welcome is freely given? What do you mean that there is more than enough to go around?

What Jesus is trying to get the crowd and us as people of faith to understand is that “every time God’s active, stretching, searching, healing love finds someone and calls that person back home, it doesn’t mean that there is less for the rest of us. It means that there is more, more dancing, more feasting, more music. It means another and now bigger party.” God’s WELCOME is full of abundance. God’s WELCOME has no end. God’s WELCOME cannot be earned. God’s WELCOME is full of God’s grace, full of God’s love and it is not something that we can earn because it is freely given to all of God’s children, no strings attached.

That’s the good news for us as God’s community. And it is also a challenge for us as God’s community, as a community that has embraced a mission of WELCOME. “Welcome and homecoming sound all warm and fuzzy but the return home may present all sorts of challenges.” When we truly welcome God’s children into our lives, into our church, into relationship with us, we will be challenged to look beyond our comfort zones. We will be challenged to go to places that are unknown. We will be challenged to see all people made in the image of God. We will be challenged to welcome them like God welcomes us, fully, unabashedly, freely given, no strings attached.

And that sometimes is not an easy task. We really want to say let’s welcome only those who look like us, think like us, are like us. We really want to say let’s only welcome those who come in our doors. We really want to say let’s only welcome those who deserve it.

And the Good news and our reminder is that God’s grace, God’s love, God’s welcome doesn’t work that way.

Our Scripture reminds us that cost of true welcome is huge. It requires sacrifice. It requires reconciliation. It requires that we put pride aside, that we recognize our connection to all, not just the people we like. It requires that we show everyone grace just like God has shown us.

The WELCOME that we accepted as our mission and vision is not a cookie-cutter, false, commercial sense of WELCOME, that can be bagged and tagged and sold. It is a true welcome that invites everyone to come to their true home, their home in God. Our mission of WELCOME will not let us simply stay in our pews and say when people come in these doors, we will welcome them. This welcome that we embraced is the welcome that Jesus showed the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the poor, the sick, the deserving and the “not-so-deserving.” This WELCOME that we embraced is the scandalous welcome that the father in our Scripture showed his two sons. This WELCOME that we as Midway Christian Church embraced is the scandalous, unending, life-giving, life-transforming welcome that God first showed us. This WELCOME encourages us to show all of God’s children that their true home is within reach and we are merely the companions along the journey.

That is what we mean when we say we serve God and welcome all through: worship, education, love, community, open table, mission and evangelism. That's is what we mean when we say "Everyone is welcome". Jesus didn't tell his followers, "I'll wait to you find me and then I'll welcome you. He told them follow me. He told them "I'm coming to your house today. I'm going to eat at your table." He searched out the sick and the lost. He searched out the deserving and the undeserving. He searched out those who needed to hear this word of WELCOME and grace.

When we say WELCOME as Midway Christian Church, we say it because we remember what it was like to be lost and then found. We remember what it was like to have Jesus softly and tenderly calling us home. we remember that there is a condition worse than death, and that is being lost. We remember that there is a condition better than life, and that is being found, embraced, accepted, welcomed to our true home, to our true community, to our true family. God's grace is WELCOME and WELCOME is God's grace. Thanks be to God! And that's the WELCOME that we embraced and are called to live out as Midway Christian Church.

May we always remember that all of God's children are created to be at home with God and that we are called to welcome all just like God welcomed us. Amen.