

“Welcome home” a sermon based on Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 31 March 2019. Note – some ideas and content in this sermon are drawn from a 1999 sermon by the Rev. Dr Barbara Brown Taylor.

Over the last week Muslim people have said they have not felt more at home in New Zealand than at present; a startling statement in the face of the terrorist killing of fifty people at prayer. I think it speaks of the grace of Islam and the support New Zealanders have offered each other. We saw that Islamic grace last Tuesday night here at Knox. Two local Muslim leaders came to the event hosted here. It was the first time one of them had been in a church and they want to come one Sunday night. As people reach out to one other perhaps we are all finding what it means to be at home. And amid the sense of home, are remarkable statements of forgiveness.

Today we heard the parable of the prodigal sons, the parable of the lavishly loving father. Perhaps it takes us to the heart of what we are seeing around us these days. The parable is so familiar it has become part of the wall-paper and we have stopped noticing how shocking the wall-paper is. All its life it has been one of the most offensive stories Jesus told.

Fred Craddock says that he told the story once and ended it differently, by saying that the older brother was thrown a party for being loyal and hard-working. More than one person in the congregation yelled out – that is how it should have ended. Barbara Brown Taylor calls the story amoral. I am grateful to Dr Brown for inspiring key ideas in this sermon. The offensiveness started early.

Tertullian was an early defender of the faith. He insisted that the parable must never apply to Christians. If it did, he said, sinners would use the parable to pardon their sin. “Who will worry about losing what can so easily be regained?” he asked. Others agreed with him—especially those who had to decide what to do with Christians who had bowed down to the Roman gods. If we were early Christians living in the Roman Empire, it was likely that sooner or later we would find yourself standing in front of an altar to Caesar, with several scary soldiers in metal hats inviting us to put a pinch of incense on the coals of that altar.

If we declined or demurred, they would let us know that we either did it or we died—and not only us, but also every member of our household, whom they just happened to have in custody. Under such circumstances many Christians put the pinch of incense in the coals. And when they tried to return to the fellowship of Christians, their way was often barred.

Novatian was a near contemporary of Tertullian. He said that while God certainly had the power to forgive such apostasy, the church should not—indeed, could not—re-admit them to the body of Christ without a long and public period of humiliation. If the church really was Christ’s body, Novatian reasoned, then it was supposed to be without sin. To welcome a tainted person back into fellowship was to defile the whole body.

People argued from the other side. Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the fourth century, said that to deny anyone—Christian or not—the hope of forgiveness was to make them wanderers and exiles on the earth. Why should anyone ever repent of anything, he said, if they knew they could never go home again?

Gregory of Nazianus, also a bishop in the fourth century, asked the hard-liners: “Do you not accept repentance?” “Do you not shed a tear of mercy? I hope you may not encounter such a judge as yourself!” You sound as if you yourself were not made of flesh and blood, Gregory said in reply. “Come on, stand here on our side, on the side of human beings.”

Gregory highlighted that where we stand has everything to do with how we hear the parable.

Those of us who have done serious things in our lives—who have broken solemn vows, betrayed sacred trusts, who have hurt the people we love—we know what it is like to watch those people struggle for breath, while we wait for the words we so richly deserve: “Damn you.” Or “I hope you go to hell.” When those words do not come, however, **when they say, “I forgive you”—that is when true repentance usually begins**—not before the pardon but after it—which is why we will defend this story.

The people who find the parable offensive tend to be those who, through heroic self-discipline, have never broken the ten commandments. They have never wanted their father dead. They have never squandered their inheritance. They have never abandoned their responsibilities. Faith has to count for something, they explain. It has to be more than talk. If Jesus did not mean for people to live more virtuous lives, then why did he keep calling them to follow him?

If we do not stereotype these two brothers - the fun-loving younger brother and the dour older brother—then we may be able to recognize that we need them both as much as they need each other. Each of them embodies at least half of what the gospel is all about. As long as they remain estranged, neither of them can live whole lives.

The younger brother lives entirely by grace. He told his father to drop dead. He spent all he had. And his coming home seems to be because it was better to do so than die. Yet the old man runs towards him. This is what forgiveness looks like.

The older brother, meanwhile, lives entirely by obedience to his father. It's called righteousness or rightness. The older brother has devoted his life to being the very best—the most right—son he can be. He has never left his father's side. He has never gone against his father's wishes. He has been loyal, respectful, hardworking and honest.

The father has nothing but words of love for both sons. In the face of his younger son's remorse, he throws a party. In the face of his older son's despair, he says, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

This man refuses to choose between his children. All of his energy is focused on getting them back together again, since each of them has something the other badly needs. If the younger son is going to survive, he badly needs some of his older brother's discipline and devotion. If the older son is going to survive, he badly needs some of his younger brother's brokenness and humility. The father welcomes the younger son not because the boy is better in any way but simply because he has come home. "We had to celebrate and rejoice," the father explains to his stung elder son, "because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

This puts the burden of a happy ending squarely on the shoulders of the older son. No one even remembered to invite him to the party, mind you. He did not know one thing about it until he came home from a full day in the field to the sound of music and dancing. According to his father, however, the party is not really about the younger son. It is about being home together if only the elder brother will come inside the house.

In order to do that the older brother must **make a choice—between being right and being in relationship with his family—a wrenching choice to make.** Do you dismiss your own airtight case and go inside so you can have someone to eat with for the rest of your life? Or do you stay outside, where the air is cool and clear and you are right?

If he walks through the door he condones undue forgiveness, undeserved love. In order to remain part of the family, he must accept the amorality of that love.

The father embraces wrongdoers. The father welcomes sinners home, even at risk of losing obedient sons and daughters who cannot or will not do the same.

Come on,” the father says to his elder son, “stand here on our side, on the side of human beings.”

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