

# The God Who Welcomes

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West Side Church of Christ  
Searcy, Arkansas  
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## Scripture Reading

*“But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘this man welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:2 NIV).*

*“Jesus continued: ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ‘Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*‘When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.*

*‘But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ‘The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

*‘But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.*

*‘Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’*

*‘The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’*

*“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found’” (Luke 15:11-32)*

## ***WELCOMING SINNERS TO THE TABLE***

Don't you love a good dinner table? These tables tell a story. That spot right there is where my daughter hit her head (and hasn't done it again since). That cut on this leg happened in packing when we moved away from here. That cut on the other leg happened in our move back. I can think of friends who have sat across from us at this table... My close friends who came to pray and agonize with me when I wasn't sure if I should leave my job at Harding to take up a school presidency. We sat here and prayed together. Katie and I sat at this table when I heard the news my brother had just died. Oh, the stories this table could tell.

Table is where you tell stories; its where you share stories. And who you eat with tells me a lot about your story.

The self-righteous and well-to-do tried to think up the worst thing they could say about Jesus. And here is what they came up with: “this man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2).

Welcomes sinners. Let's focus on that first word. “Welcomes.”

When I picture someone being welcomed, the picture always involves touching. The right hand of fellowship, or the pat on the back, or the great big bear hug. This man *welcomes* sinners. And not only that—it is still true that nothing defines your social status like who you eat with. Go to any cafeteria in any high school in America. You see that kid sitting all by himself in the corner? Tells you everything, doesn't it? See the table where all the girls are dressed like cheerleaders, and all the guys are wearing their jerseys for the Friday night game? You know that table too, don't you? To eat with someone is to share social rank; and in the first century—it was also an intimate act, where you raid the pantry reserved for your own family to feed your guest, treating them as if they were family. “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Now let's think about that second word: “sinners.” That covers a big group, doesn't it? But the people making this accusation don't mean to include themselves in that group. No. Surely they have in mind the “others” (like Gentiles). The “lesser thans” (like the Samaritans or what not). And the weak. Too weak to live up to the rules like they did. Too weak to be thought of as reputable in polite society. Just weak.

We know God doesn't want us to be weak. He wants us to be strong. But how does God *feel* about the weak? The words “weak” and “weakness” appear around 80 times in the New Testament... not one of which carries a word of condemnation attached!

How does God feel about the weak? He *loves* the weak. He *died* for the weak... And he even calls you and me to be strong for this purpose: that we might bear with and bear up and bear the infirmities *of* the weak.<sup>1</sup> And that’s good news. Because all of us, at some times, in some ways, are weak.

As Jim McGuiggan notes, “Jesus always seemed to be defending the wrong kind of people.” Always sticking up for the moral reprobate, the tax-collecting swindlers, the folks who haven’t been to Temple in their entire lives. Maybe it’s because he saw them as most in need of peace and rest. Most in need of something to live for.

It’s why he came. He came to preach good news, said Isaiah, but not just that: to preach good news to the poor. He came to set free the captives. Surely that includes those caught up in a system that perpetuates cycles that need to be broken so people can have a fighting chance.

Knowing the heart of God, the great mystery here is not that He invites such people, but that *they* wanted to be around *him!* Why did the immoral, non-church-going outsiders with bad reputations want to be around the holiest person who ever lived? What was it about him that drew sinners to his side? He wasn’t light on sin. In fact, he despised it. He died to save us from its clutches. So what was it? It was this: He made them feel safe; “that God meant them no harm.”<sup>2</sup> That even now, in the sordid mess you’ve made of your life, God loves you like a father loves his only child; and he wants you.

And how did he let them know that? Well, by inviting them to the table, for one. By inviting them to the table. Tell me your story. Let me tell you mine. Share life with me. And imagine a new way of life, where all heirs to the throne are equal—and equally blessed—in the sight of God. And everything about you can be redeemed because you are beautiful in the eyes of the God who made you. Has no one ever told you that?

Who told you that God only loves you when you’re good? When Jesus chose Matthew to be his disciple, he pulled him right out of his taxing toll booth. And Matthew invited him to dinner. And all of Matthew’s friends came too—you know, tax collectors and sinners. To eat with Jesus. The Pharisees saw this. So they asked “why does this man eat with such people?” Do you what Jesus said? Jesus said, “I’m a doctor. I help sick people. I’m a mercy-giver, not a sacrifice-seeker. “I have not come to get those who think they are right with God to follow me. I have come to get sinners to follow me” (Matthew 9:13 NIrV).

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<sup>1</sup> Jim McGuiggan, *The God of the Towel*, rev. ed. (Howard Books, 1996), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> McGuiggan, *The God of the Towel*, p. 52.

***BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR A PROSTITUTE***

In his book, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*, Tony Campolo shares an experience he had late one night in Hawaii. He writes:

If you live on the East Coast and travel to Hawaii, you know that there is a time difference that makes three o'clock in the morning feel like nine. With that in mind, you will understand that whenever I go out to our fiftieth state I find myself wide awake long before dawn. Not only do I find myself up and ready to go while almost everybody else is still asleep, but I find that I want breakfast when almost everything on the island is still closed—which is why I was wandering up and down the streets of Honolulu at three-thirty in the morning, looking for a place to get something to eat.

Up a side street I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be served. This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name “greasy spoon.” I mean, I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out. But it was the only place I could find.

The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me, “What d’ya want?”

I told him, “A cup of coffee and a donut.”

He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, then grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him. I’m a realist. I know that in the back room of that restaurant, donuts are probably dropped on the floor and kicked around. But when everything is out front where I could see it, I really would have appreciated it if he had used a pair of tongs and placed the donut on some wax paper.

As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at three-thirty in the morning the door of the diner suddenly swung open, and to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman sitting beside me say, “Tomorrow’s my birthday. I’m going to be thirty-nine.”

Her “friend” responded in a nasty tone, “So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing ‘Happy Birthday?’”

“Come on!” said the woman next to me. “Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that’s all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don’t want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I’ve never had a birthday party my whole life. Why should I have one now?”

When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the fat guy behind the counter and I asked him, “Do they come in here every night?”

“Yeah!” he answered.

“The one right next to me, does she come here every night?”

“Yeah!” he said. “That’s Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d’ya wanna know?”

“Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday,” I told him. “What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?”

A smile slowly crossed his chubby face and he answered with measured delight. “That’s great! I like it! That’s a great idea!” Calling to his wife who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, “Hey! Come out here! This guy’s got a great idea. Tomorrow’s Agnes’s birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!”

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, “That’s wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody ever does anything nice and kind for her.”

“Look,” I told them, “if it’s okay with you, I’ll get back here tomorrow morning about two-thirty and decorate the place. I’ll even get a birthday cake.”

“No way,” said Harry (that was his name). “The birthday cake’s my thing. I’ll make the cake.”

At two-thirty the next morning I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!” I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes...and me!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (after all, I was kind of the MC of the affair) and when they came in we all screamed, “Happy Birthday!”

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted. . .so stunned. . .so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to one of the stools along the counter we all sang “Happy Birthday” to her. As we came to the end of our singing, “Happy birthday, dear Agnes, Happy birthday to you,” her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles lit on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, “Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don’t blow out the candles, I’m gonna hafta blow out the candles.” And, after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, “Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake.”

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, “Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I. . .I mean is it okay if I kind of. . .what I want to ask you is. . .is it okay if I keep the cake a little while? I mean is it all right if we don’t eat it right away?”

Harry shrugged and answered, “Sure! It’s okay. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home if you want to.”

“Can I?” she asked. Then looking at me she said, “I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home and show it to my mother, okay? I’ll be right back. Honest!”

She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all stood there motionless, she left.

When the door closed there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, “What do you say we pray?”

Looking back on it now it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner at Honolulu at three-thirty in the morning. But it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter, and said, “Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?”

In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at three-thirty in the morning.”

Harry waited a moment, then he answered, “No you don’t. There’s no church like that. If there was, I’d join it. I’d join a church like that!”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus founded a church like that. Jesus said to the leaders of his day, “What I’m about to tell you is true. Tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God ahead of you. John came to show you the right way to live. And you did not believe him. But the tax collectors and the prostitutes did” (Matthew 21:31). Oh, we know the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. Paul says that in 1 Corinthians 6. He says we know the sexually immoral and the swindlers won’t inherit the kingdom of God. But God loves such people, invites such people, sets down with them in table fellowship and shares his heart. And it changes a man or woman. Paul lists all these things and then he says “and such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” Yes...God calls tax collectors and prostitutes to his table. And so should we. How else will they ever know there is a better life just waiting for them?

### ***A CHURCH THAT WELCOMES ALL***

On my try-out Sunday here at Westside, someone came forward to ask for prayers. What I witnessed next was truly remarkable. Every Shepherd here—all of them—came down the aisles and sat with that young man. They held his hand. They patted his back.

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<sup>3</sup> Tony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God is a Party: God’s Radical Plan for His Family* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

They sat with him and cried with him. Come to find out—that’s not unusual here. A few weeks after I began preaching, on a Wednesday night, a sweet lady raised her hand during the service where an elder was talking about all the great things going on in this church and how you can get involved. She said “excuse me, but I am brand new. Do you mind if I ask who you are?” “I’m Steve Moore,” he said, “I’m one of the elders here. How can I help?” Armed only with that information, “I’m brand new,” I wanted to run over to her after services to introduce myself. But after the closing prayer, I couldn’t make it through the mob. So many women in this congregation had already gathered around her to welcome, answer questions, and make friends. It’s just who you are.

And that’s going to come in handy as God answers our prayers and sends more and more of his children to us. Dan Dawson and the other lovers of Christ who are praying every day that we can be a light in our community and share Jesus with hurting people told us—on a Wednesday night—that if we open our doors and welcome, truly welcome any and all who need Jesus Christ and hear that his love is on display here, they won’t always look like me, or think like me, or even smell like me. But Jesus adores them, and he welcomes them just the same as he welcomes me.

I once lived two blocks from this building. It was a sweet deal—my little 900 square foot house was only \$300 a month rent. Can’t beat that! And I learned to really appreciate my neighbors, some of whom were very much like me, and some whose background and interests were very unlike me. On the one hand, the neighbor to my right moved down here from the Northeast. She was a well-to-do regal woman who loved older houses and put quite a bit into restoring the corner lot. On the other hand, I had a steady stream of meth addicts who walked through my front yard, heading to my neighbor’s house on the left. And I would sit on my front porch and remind myself that God welcomes everyone on my street and wants to eat with us. Living next door to each other is one thing; sitting on the same pew, drinking from the same cup is quite another.

### ***THE AWAITING FATHER***

He was a child in the house of his father. Enjoying the splendor of having everything he could ever want, and heir to even more. But one day he cried out “I must have my freedom.” Picture the Father as he speaks softly to his son: “Have you no freedom? You live here free of charge. You can come and go as you please. You have access to food and shelter. All that I have is yours. I give you daily bread and forgive even the gravest offenses. You are my son and there is nothing I would keep from you. Have you no freedom?” “No” the stubborn kid replied. “Freedom is doing what I wish as I wish.” “Oh” replies the Father ever so tenderly, “But freedom as I define it is that you

become what you ought to be. All these rules I give you, all these ‘thou shalt’s’ and ‘thou shalt not’s’ you are so upset about are intended to help keep you free—free from becoming a slave to your own desires; free from finding out just how binding the slavery of self-deception can be. I want to keep you free from all this. You are a king’s son, and I am here to make sure you have the best, and that you are safe and sound when the day comes for you to receive it.” The boy didn’t want to become a rebellious youth. He didn’t want to renounce the family name. He heard that burning cry we all hear from time to time within us: “Just once! Let me try the tempting glamour on the other side of the hill, just once. Let me experience the life I am missing.” Imagine the discussion around the dinner table that evening. When the Son makes it clear he is determined in his mind. He’s going. But he needs money. Kenneth Bailey lived in this part of the world for a while, and he wrote a book to help us American city-slickers think like people from a rural Middle-Eastern village.<sup>4</sup> He says that when the boy left town, everyone in the village would have taken offense. If they were to ever see him again, he would get more than a mere protest. Adults would seethe with anger, while boys would throw rocks at him. And no one would speak to him. This is more than slipping away from mom and dad in the middle of the night.

The Father doesn’t say a word. He gets up, goes over to the vault behind the picture hanging by the doorway, and gives the boy—his son—the money he has been saving. Do not miss this important part of the story. The boy didn’t run away, unannounced. Every step that boy took, the Father knew. And the Father, watching from the house had only one question on his mind: “How will my boy come back?” As he sat, night after night, at the dinner table with an empty seat.

So the boy spends his money as he wishes. He shows off his new clothes; he provides great feasts for his new “friends.” Everything he has, of course, comes from his father! But in the wrong hands, with the wrong motives, even good things can be turned into idols that get in our way, or vehicles to hurt one another and ourselves. It leaves you stuck in emptiness. When the money runs out, so do the friends...along with any hope of a ‘better life.’ And for the first time in his life...“he began to be in need.” Now the son who wanted nothing more than to be free, is mastered by himself. “And no one gave him anything.”

But “when he came to himself” the story says. That’s the turning point, you know. That’s when the plot starts toward resolution. He’s not disgusted with himself because

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<sup>4</sup> See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 161-62, 178, 181. For Bailey references I am indebted to Harold Shank, “Chapter 5: Listen To The Heartbeat,” in *Listen and Make Room: Joining God in Welcoming Children* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2020).

of what he sees in front of him. That could only turn him into a cynic. No. He's disgusted with himself because of what he remembers *used to be* before him. He remembers home. It was the idea of home that awakes his sense of lostness. He knows how bad off he is because he has experienced a better way! A Father who gave...and never left him in need.

He prepares a speech to tell his father. “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. And am no longer worthy to be called your son. Just make me like one of your hired hands.” I don't deserve grace. But maybe he'll show mercy.

But the father doesn't know how to lower his gaze; and is unable to think less of the Son He loves. When the boy was still a long way off, the Father—who stood watch at the gate every day and every night—locked eyes on his precious child and, picking up the train of his robe, he runs to the boy! Bailey tells us that adult men at that place at that time didn't run. It wouldn't be dignified. Least of all, for the most respected man in the village to run past the angry crowd seething with hostility at the news that the wretched one who offended us all, cutting our resources and abandoning our village is daring to come back home! But “Oh”, says one commentator, “see how love gives wings to a Father's feet.” The Father is filled with compassion, and can't stop kissing his boy...even when the boy has done his very worst, the Father thinks only the very best.

The son begins his prepared speech and says the words “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” There was more speech prepared; there was a plea for some semblance of mercy—‘treat me like one of your hired hands.’ “Maybe I can work off my debt, or at least, earn your tolerance.” But a Father's love doesn't work like that.

“Not worthy to be called my Son? Not one more word. Someone, go to my closet and bring out my best robe (the one reserved for royal guests)—and wrap it around my boy. Get the signet ring—you know, the one that shows who owns the farm and runs the place—and put it on his finger. Bring shoes to comfort his tired feet. Servants in the field don't wear shoes. But this is no servant in the field. This is my son. I'm not finished. Forget what we had prepared for dinner. We aren't going to just fill up one more bowl of soup. No. I want you to go get the fatted calf—Ole Bessie. And I want you to kill it! One calf could feed a hundred, and if not eaten by sundown, all that meat will spoil. Do you understand what I'm telling you? I'm throwing a party to end all parties! For this, my son was dead and is alive again, was lost...but now is found.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For many of these reflections, see Shank, “Chapter 5,” in *Listen and Make Room*.

For years we have called this story “the prodigal Son”—making use of one definition of ‘prodigal’: to spend one’s money or resources in reckless fashion. But there is a second definition of prodigal: “having or giving something on a lavish scale.” And on that definition, is there anyone more prodigal than the Father? We can’t outspend God! We throw half of our inheritance to the wind, he doubles down and puts every resource of heaven at our disposal upon our return. For that reason, Tim Keller argues we ought to call this story “The Prodigal God.” “See what manner of love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called Sons of God. And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).<sup>6</sup>

Keller wasn’t the first to put the focus where it should be. Helmut Thielicke years ago called this parable “The Waiting Father.” Ah yes. He waits. He waits. He sends out his invitation to all who are far off. He sends his messengers into the highways with a “whosoever will” call to come and feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb. He wants his house to be filled, and he wants all of his children home. He waits. But he waits to welcome.

In 1669, Rembrandt painted one of the most stunning pieces of Baroque art, one he entitled “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” Most of the painting is dark, with characters in the shadows. But the father and his son stand in fresh light. There’s the father, in costly apparel, but with outstretched arms, hovering over, cradling his long-lost son. And there’s the son, dressed in rags, one shoe gone, on his knees, his head buried in his father’s bosom. But Rembrandt added another subtle feature we should be sure to notice. It is not his nose that is buried in his father’s chest, but his ear... As the son listens to the racing heartbeat of a love-sick father. And there, the old man short of breath, but full of Spirit, welcomes his son home.<sup>7</sup>

### ***WHERE ARE WE IN THE STORY?***

And what about us? Where are we in this story? God, our Father, has given us life and breath. Every good thing we’ve ever known has been given to us by our Father. But have we taken for granted his good things and given up our seat at the table in search of something else? To deny life in the kingdom and at the table, to deny this constant relationship is like holding our breath and refusing to breathe. It’s not just sinful, it’s silliness. But sometimes we do it. And in doing so, we don’t only hurt ourselves. We often hurt others in the process as we lose our sense of identity. And we hurt the heart

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<sup>6</sup> See Helmut Thielicke, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son: Part One” and “The Parable of the Prodigal Son: Part Two” in his book *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, Translated by John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959), p.17-29 & 30-40; See also Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God*.

<sup>7</sup> See Harold Shank, *What the Bible Says about the Heart of God: Listening To His Heartbeat* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2013).

of God. What is our “far country”? Where do we go to get away from God? Maybe it's money. Or technology. Maybe its something we take to forget, someone we use rather than love, some place we go to escape his provisions. Maybe we, like the prodigal, have squandered away our lives. Squandered away our marriage. Squandered away our reputation in this community. Filled our bodies and our minds with useless things and given in to our basest desires. If that's true, hear me and hear me well:

God has not given me up. He still counts me his child. He tells me that he cannot forget me. When anybody has don as much for me as my Father in heaven has done, when he sacrifices his best beloved for me, he simply cannot forget me. And therefore I can come to him. God pays no regard to what I have *lost*; he thinks only of what I *am*: his unhappy child, standing there at his door again.<sup>8</sup>

When the Father sits down at his dinner table, and looks over at the seat which has sat empty all this time, now filled with his long-lost son, he can hardly contain his excitement. But now, he looks over at the well-worn seat on the other side of the table, where his dutiful, always-faithful, diligent other son always sat, only this time, it is empty. The text says the brother was angry and refused to go in (Luke 15: 28). Another empty seat. Another son estranged. And yet again, it's the Father who goes out to meet his boy. You can imagine how that boy felt this day, can't you? 'This guy wanted you dead, Father! He took our money and abandoned us! That's double the work for me with less to work with. And now, without so much as a slap on the wrist, you've thrown a feast for him. And killed the fatted calf. Not Bessie! Who do you think has fattened her up all these years? No—this isn't fair. This isn't just. I will stand here outside—just me in my rightness—as I stand for truth. It's just the principle of the thing.

He doesn't even call him brother. Even the servant told him, “*your brother* has come home.” But the only words this older brother can muster when he speaks to his father is to call him “*this son of yours*.” After all, says the older brother, with righteous indignation in his voice, “he's spent all his money and time with *prostitutes* for Pete's sake. And you are going to eat with someone like that? Who would do something like that?” (Luke 15:30).

I look over at this side of the table, and I am reminded of what my good friend Kent Jobe recently told me: that according to the 2010 Census data, 42% of White County residents have no church home of any kind. 42%! That's our neighbors, for sure. And lots of people who live three streets over—you know, in the neighborhoods we don't visit much and don't drive through. 42% that surely experience homesickness but have no home to go to. And many of them let you know they are in that crowd by how they

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<sup>8</sup> Thielicke, p. 39.

live their lives. And its easy, tempting, maybe even reasonable, to stand opposed to everything they are and everything they stand for. To let them know it on facebook every chance we get, and through our body language, to let them know that only if and when they shape up and share my views will we share any of our hard-earned resources or welcome them into our home or save a spot for them at the table of the Lord. I don't think there is a person in here who says that; or even consciously thinks that. But I wonder---does my life *shout* the opposite? It must not, because such people don't seem to be running to me like they did to Jesus. And they won't know that that seat—*that* one right there—has their name on it. And if my Lord invites them—*even them*—into loving fellowship, will I join the party?

I hope so. Because to the lost son the Father said “don't you understand? You *don't* earn your keep with me. No ‘make me a servant’ talk. You're my son.” But to the older brother the Father said, “don't you understand? You *can't* earn your keep with me. Your righteous deeds are simply what is required of a dutiful son. You haven't been collecting points. You are in my eyes just as welcome as your brother because you are my son. Can't you see that? Can't you see him the way I see you?”

Sometimes I can't believe God would let such rif-raf at his table. When the prodigal Son comes home, you better believe he brings his baggage with him. And when sinners come here, expect that to be the case, too. But remember this: he calls *me* even with *my* baggage; some sons live in recklessness; others in self-righteousness. But God loves us in spite of that, and calls us to his table.

And you know, there's another brother at that table. Oh yes. There are three brothers. The older brother who stayed. The younger brother who came back home. But this is the home of the Father. And sitting at the right hand of the Father, is our older brother, Jesus Christ. Look into his eyes. See his hands and side as proof. He doesn't want an empty seat in the house.

Hear the sweet closing words of a sermon on this subject preached a half century ago:

“Only if we allow ourselves to be kindled by the love of the Father's heart and then this very day look around for those to whom we can apply this love ... only if we enter into this living circuit of divine love and let it warm us and flow through us will it suddenly become clear to us what it means and what a joy it is to know the fatherly heart in heaven and the blessed brotherly heart of our Lord and Saviour...What a wretched thing it is to call oneself a Christian and yet be a stranger and a grumbling servant in the Father's house. And what a glorious thing it is to become aware every day anew of the miracle that there is Someone who hears us. Someone who is waiting for us. Someone who wonderfully sets

everything to rights and finds a way out for us when all we can do is to wear ourselves out with worry. Someone who one day, when our last hour comes and we go back home from the far country and the hectic adventure of life, will be waiting for us on the steps of the eternal home of the Father and will lead us to the place where we may speak with Jesus forever and ever and where we shall be surrounded by that joy which here we have only begun to taste.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thielicke, p. 40.