

***Being Found***

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Chris Tryon]

Good morning our 2nd reading today is from Luke Chapter 15. Verses 11 through 32.

*11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.*

*25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began*

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*to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"*

[Voice of Kristen Brown]

Well I listened to a TED talk this week by our own Penny Sterling, who is not here this morning, I don't see her, OK, and she did a TEDx Rochester event and posted it. It was a great reminder that we're all living in the middle of stories and we that need to pay attention to who's telling the story that we are living in. The church has a lot of stories and some of them are true and some of them aren't true. And this is not a new thing, this has been around for a long time. I would say that a lot of what Jesus does is trying to tell a new story to especially religious people that have the wrong story line running, to invite people into life-giving Kingdom stories. So, if you were here with us last week you know we've talked about, this series the next 5 weeks now, today and the next four weeks, it's going to be on the parables of Jesus. And we're talking about what it looks like to live a kingdom life and that kingdom living takes place in our everyday kinds of situations, we live the kingdom in kingdom ways in the world. So, our parable today is about this: it's a story about a father and 2 sons and a party. You heard the story earlier and I will say this: I think the party gets left out in most of the titles, if you see in your bible it usually says something like the parable of the Prodigal Son or the parable of the lost son, sometimes the brother gets a little play, but for the most part the party is entirely left out of the title. In fact, sometimes I think that's why we live the wrong story because we leave out the party in the title, we've forgotten this parable is about a party. So, for today, at least, I'm going to call it the "parable of the party" and I'll tell you, so it's funny I was talking about this out in the lobby and a couple people asked me what parable were preaching and I said well a lot of people call this the parable of the prodigal but I'm going to call it the parable the party and then we were joking around about, like, being a church of introverts and we're not, like, necessarily always the people that feel the most confident going to parties. And I'll tell you I was raised in that kind of Christian environment that develops socially awkward people who don't know how to go to a party, [Laughter] like, I really was that person and we're going to talk about my kind of people today a little bit and it's been a long walk home for some of us to learn how to go to a

party.

So, before we get to the parable we need to consider the setting and which Jesus tells the story. We're in Luke 15, if you want to look at this in you're... the Bible in front of you, on the red Bible, and Jesus is hanging out like Jesus does with some folks who have come to listen to him talk about the kingdom. Now, there are two kinds of people you normally find around Jesus and both of them are here in the story. The first verse of Chapter 15 says, "now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear Jesus but the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered 'this man welcome sinners and eats with them'." Here are our two groups: we have the tax collectors and sinners and the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. We might say the rule breakers and the rule keepers. These people could not be more opposite and yet they always all are hanging out with Jesus, and that's one of the things I actually really love about Jesus, all kinds of opposite people end up hanging out with him. And these two groups are actually essential to our story. Jesus told the story that we heard this morning to these people and he invited them to find themselves in the story. And we are invited to find ourselves in the story, as we think about it through their eyes. We're going to ask ourselves: what does this story mean for us, where are we at in it?

So, the event that sparks this parable is an accusation that Jesus eats with the wrong people. This is a common accusation that is lobbed at Jesus, he always is having dinner parties and they're always with all the wrong people. That is what the Pharisees, who believe they know something about the right and the wrong people, accuse Jesus of. They're very good about that kind of thing, they do it like it's their job, and in their mind, it is their job to define who are the right and who are the wrong people. In their world, they are the keepers of religious ethics. And Jesus' response to their statement that he eats with all the wrong people is to tell three stories. In this chapter, if you look there are three stories in a row that are all parables. First, he tells about a shepherd who had 100 sheep and lost one of them and goes to find it, and then about a woman who had 10 coins and loses one and goes to find it, and then about a father who has two sons and that's the story that we are going to look at today.

So, the younger son in the story -- Jesus starts off with the lay of the land and there's a father and two sons and then the plot thickens because the younger son comes to the father one day and says, "give me my inheritance" and the father does, which is actually a little bit of a surprise in the story, you wouldn't necessarily think that that is what he's going to do. He divides his property it says -- we don't know how much -- and the text says he splits it between the two

sons. So, the younger son who asked for his inheritance takes off for a distant country, it says, and there squandered his wealth in wild living. That's from the NIV. I think that the Bible that you have says "dissolute living", which I'm not sure what that word means, it's not a word I use on a daily basis, so I kind of like the NIV because I get that, I can kind of picture wild living. If you can picture dissolute living, then feel free to use that word. [Laughter].

OK, so for this son to say "I'm taking my inheritance and I'm going" he's saying I'm no longer your son, I am my own person. Normally, you take your inheritance when the person has died, right, so he's making a statement about what he's hoping for his father. He says I will do what I want and I will live my own way. But soon enough his big plans run into the real world as our big plans tend to do and he finds himself in a pig sty longing to eat the remnants that are thrown out to feed the pigs. And Jesus picks pigs for a reason in this story, it's not just any other animal, pigs are like the lowest of the low animals, they are considered unclean animals in the Jewish context. And in the minds of those hearing the story, especially for the Pharisees who are the good rule keepers, life with pigs is beyond redemption, you can't come back from living with pigs. This is the point where we would write off the son, right, he is beyond hope. And in fact, in Deuteronomy 21, a passage in the Old Testament law that the Pharisees would be very familiar with, it's uh, the law says that a rebellious child should be stoned to death. Take note. That's how we might expect the story... that's definitely how the Pharisees would expect the story to go.

The son, it says, however, comes to his senses and remembers his father has a house with servants and potentially, maybe, he could beg his way back in. He makes a decision based on self-preservation, if you notice, which isn't the best motive and isn't the worst motive. He doesn't go back necessarily because he loves his father, but he goes back. So, you can imagine him sort of rehearsing the story on the road as he's walking, wondering about his reception, he probably knows the story... the verse in Deuteronomy. What can he possibly say that could fix this mess? And then we're told, before he gets home, while he's still a long way off, his father sees him and runs to him. Now we aren't told this, but we're sort of left to imagine that for the father to have been on the road that day, the father must have been on the road other days, that the father has been looking for the son before the son started looking for the father. And before his son can even give him the whole story about what's happened it's almost like he gets cut off, no excuses, no begging. He's home and that's all that the father wanted is for his son to be home. He has come back smelling like dirt and sweat and pigs and he is welcomed and embraced by his father who just wanted him home. It's not because he got himself together,

it's because the father never stopped loving him. There is no question what would happen next: the father throws a party, invites the village, kills the fattened calf, gives him a robe and a ring and sandals.

One commentator writes about this parable says the main reason Jesus tells the parable might not be, like we think, to teach repentance. That's actually... there's not as much actually in this passage about repentance. We get more description of the party and what the party is like than of the conversation between the father and the son. This scholar argues the parable is told to remind the Pharisees that joy and celebration is the serious business of the Kingdom. And in fact, in the other two parables in the story there is no talk of repentance, the talk is of the party. That's what the Pharisees really struggle to understand about Jesus. That's why they always accuse him of eating with the wrong people, he's having the wrong guests at his parties. The kingdom of heaven is like a party that everyone is invited to especially, those who don't normally get invited to religious parties. Jesus says this party is especially for them. I imagine the scene at the beginning of this chapter kind of like a lunch room when I'm in junior high. [Laughter] That's not really what it was like, but that's what it was like in my head. So, there's like this table with tax collectors and the uncool kids and Jesus is at that table and they are laughing and joking around because I think Jesus laughed and joked around. And then I picture, you know, the cool kids all sitting at the other table and giving side eye and kind of like, in a way, we we're too cool for this, we're too cool for you. And in this story, Jesus is sort of telling them, like, you know, you do what you want to do, but the joke's on you, I'm where the party's at.

[Laughter]

You know, the Pharisees have been so concerned, their whole lives, about drawing lines, and who's in and who's out, and only associating with the right people, and at the end of the day they drew their circle so tight that Jesus wasn't in it. And now they're standing on the side and they are watching the party happen. But, you know what, Jesus loves Pharisees. We don't always remember that, we remember that Jesus loves prodigals, but Jesus also loves the Pharisees. Jesus has a consistently inclusive ethic. If you want to sit at Jesus' table you're in. He doesn't make anyone come. But all are invited and he's the only one that gets to draw the boundary.

This is where we need to talk about our second character in the story, the father's older son, the brother to the prodigal. We find him moping outside refusing to come to the party. The

older son cannot believe what is happening right now, this is not how the story was supposed to go! His younger brother went off into the world and he heard rumors about his lifestyle, and now he's back and his father is throwing him a party. But, he, being the good son that he is, he will not associate with these people. Notice in the text when the father comes out to talk to him he calls him "this son of yours", not "my brother". He puts as much distance as he can between them. And he is really mad about the party. He's probably somewhat mad about the sinner who came home, but his real beef -- and I mean that literally -- is that his father is killing the golden... er the fattened calf and celebrating homecoming. He doesn't like to go to parties. He feels socially awkward at parties, I think. The text says the older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. Notice the father goes out to both sons, it's a parallel in the passage. But he answered his father, "look all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed you, yet you never even gave me 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 killed the fattened calf". You throw him a party. He's mad about the party. It's subtle, but do you notice what he's implying? He's saying the father has been holding out on the son, that the father is stingy. "You never give me anything." Now you remember at the beginning of the story it says the father divided the inheritance between them. The father corrects him, "son, you have always been with me and all that I have is yours". "You could have had a party any day, it's yours. Your joyless life has been your choice." The son stayed home but was just as distant, his life was drudgery and rule following and stinginess. He has been home this whole time and never knew the heart of his father which was lavish life.

This seems to be the classic sin of the church: we fail to understand the love of God has for others and so we fail to understand the love God has for us. Now I don't know, this is a little bit reading outside the parable, but I sometimes wonder if the younger brother left because his older brother was such a killjoy. Like, he literally doesn't know how to have a good time. Even now after the party is started and his father comes out to him, he is like the Pharisees and the more distance this son puts between himself and the sinners at the party, the more distance he puts between himself and the father. Because the father is at the party, it is his party, that's where he's going to be found.

So, we have to stop and ask for a moment if this parable that we've always called the parable of the prodigal or of the lost son, if that's the right name. Which son is lost right now? Which one doesn't know where the party is? That's what's kind of funny about Pharisee logic, they think they're drawing the circle and they are on the inside of it, but really, they're the ones outside in

the dark. And yet God loves, God loves them. God's love is wide enough to include them. They too have been found in the dark and been invited to come in by the father.

Well, the parable leaves an open question. Did the older son go into the party? It doesn't tell us. That's the invitation for us this morning as well. Are we at the party? Do we want to go in to the party? Now, we could stop here, we could look at the two sons and say which one am I? Am I the younger son? Am I in the midst of throwing my own party? And when I stop and look and I'm really honest I realize that I'm starving and I smell like pigs? Most people I know, I've known who have ever worked the 12 steps have had that moment. I think people in recovery can actually teach us a lot about what repentance really means. They normally call it rock bottom. It's the moment you realize that this thing that you thought was the party is actually killing you. And whether it's through recovery or not, the same is true for all of us, we hit those moments where we realize that what we're using to sort of mask the pain of our lives is actually killing us. That is not the kingdom, we can come home from there. It might take some work and sometimes it takes professional help, but it is worth it. We were not made to live in pig sties, we were made to live in the Father's house. It is a house of true joy and health and celebration.

Or maybe you are the older son. Maybe, you say I have always done the right thing and hated all the right people, and yet my soul feels like a desert and I am angry all the time. In a way, you have also been throwing your own party and you have been stuffing yourself full of anger and envy and pride. There are reasons those are called Deadly Sins. And we almost can get away with it. There are culturally acceptable sins to gorge ourselves on. But they are killing us slowly from the inside and keeping us from life in the kingdom. You can come home from them. And it might take some work and it might take some professional help, but it's worth it and you can come home. We were not made to live in anger and hostility, but to be embraced by the generous love the Father.

At this point in our lives, many of us have had experiences of being both of these sons. For some of you, that's where you need to end this morning and just reflect on that. Where are you at? God is searching for you, finding you, loving you wherever you are this morning. But, there is a third character in our story that we should spend a few minutes on, that of course is the father. Sometimes, we make the father too quickly the God character in the story. In our first reading of the parable it is good for us to remember that God is generous. And God has generous searching love.

Paul writes in Chapter 13 of 1st Corinthians, this famous chapter on love, "when I was a child, I

used to talk like a child, and see things like a child does, and think like a child, but now that I have become an adult I have finished with childish ways.” It is comfortable to be the wayward son or the angry elder son, but we are actually called to become the father.

Henry Nouwen writes in his book on the prodigal son, which I commend to you, it's called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, he writes, “to become like the father whose only authority is compassion I have to shed countless tears and so prepare my heart to receive anyone whatever their journey has been and forgive them from that hurt.” One of the great gifts Christ gave to the church is to extend the forgiveness of God to others. And we're actually going to pick up on that theme next week when we pick up on the parable of forgiveness, so, if you don't want to learn how to forgive people I wouldn't come next week [laughter], but for now, it is the heart of the father, the compassionate generous party-throwing heart that is the picture of Kingdom life.

As we close our time this morning, I actually want to spend a little time in contemplative prayer and reflection on the passage. This passage has invited us to come in and to find ourselves in it. So, I want to spend a little time doing that this morning in the tradition of St Ignatius who talked about a kind of an imaginative prayer where we pray ourselves into the story. So, if you are a kid and want to pack up your busy bag and join us we would love that, I know you do contemplative prayer sometimes on Sunday mornings, so this is a good community event for all of us. And if you are a parent and are now, like, just a little nervous, it's OK, there will be distractions, this will not be a perfectly quiet time. And sometimes it's good to be reminded that God finds us in the midst of our distracted, busy, noisy lives. So, feel free to take whatever posture is most appropriate for you this morning to open yourselves up to God. I'm actually going to sit over here on the side and be out of the way. And I'm going to ask the tech loft to put up the picture on the screen, some of you might want to... this is Rembrandt's version of the parable, probably one of the most famous paintings of this parable, and if it's helpful to you to reflect on this, that's great, if it's helpful for you to close your eyes and imagine yourself in the story in your own mind that is wonderful too.

But, take a minute to quiet your mind. Take some deep breaths, quiet your breathing. Now imagine yourself in the story. First, place yourself in the story as the younger son. You've been[CS1] in a far-off country, far from home. Maybe you're sorry and maybe you aren't. How do you feel as you stand in the story as the younger son? What do you hope for? See God standing on the road looking for you, ready to welcome you home.



Now place yourself in the story as the older son. You have never felt like your father loves you even though you have done everything you can to earn that love. How do you feel as you stand in this story as the older son? What do you hope for? What would it take for you to put down your anger and come to the party? Hear God say to you this morning, “my beloved child you are always with me, all that I have is yours”.

Now place yourself in the scene as the father. You have two children that you love more than you can ever express. One child has left and returned home and one child is home but feels far away. Picture those children with love. Is there anyone you want to invite into the story with you to feel that love? Bring that person and invite them to know the love of God.

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God.” Amen.

Every week we celebrate being the beloved children of God at this table. At this table, we are invited to reflect on the depth of God's love for us. When we gather every week we remember that God loved us even unto death. On the night that Jesus was handed over to suffering and death he took bread after he had given thanks he broke the bread and he gave it to his disciples and he said, “take it, eat all of you, this is my body that is broken for you”. And after supper he took the cup and he gave it to them and he said, “drink of this, all of you, this is a new covenant in my blood which is shed for you, for many, for the forgiveness of sin. Every time you do this, do it in remembrance of me.”

This is the table not of the church but of the Lord, it is made ready for those who love him and who want to love him more, so come you who have much faith and you who have little, you who have been here often and you who have not been here for a long time, you who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come not because it is I who invites you, it is the Lord, it is His will that those who want should meet him here. If you are new to Artisan, we invite you to come this morning. If you desire the love of God, you are invited to this table whether or not you are a member of Artisan. So, how we do it here at Artisan is we come down the center aisles we take a piece of bread, dip it in one of the cups – there is wine and juice and gluten free options of both of those and there are single serve options as well, if that's what you need, because everyone is invited and there should be bread for everyone at Christ's table. Also at this time, if you are in need of prayer for anything this morning we have a member of the prayer team who would love to pray with you at any point during Communion this morning. So,

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the table is set, the feast is prepared, you are invited. Come in and join the celebration!

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](http://ArtisanChurch.com)