

12.17.2023 Sermon

Entering God's Embrace | Luke 15:11-32

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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Like I said, I've been recovering from COVID. I'm an extrovert, and I was going a little crazy in quarantine. So, it's good to be where the people are.

Yes, that was for the Disney people on the religious calendar. Today, we are in the third week of Advent. In many churches, they will be lighting a pink candle, which represents Joy. Joy points to something deeper, less fleeting than happiness or a smile. Joy is an inner conviction, rooted in faith and hope. Joy is our response to the world based on our expectation that all will be made right one day. Joy is the lens through which we view the world, and we believe that the source of our joy is our Creator, who loves us so deeply.

And that's what we're talking about today. How do we experience and connect with this God who loves us? Who wants to show us who He is and how much He cares for us? Okay, so we're going to start with a little video. I was thinking of doing this live, but I thought we are in the 21st century, and I have Gen Z kids. Well, I don't even know; they might be Gen something else. So, we're going to show a little skit.

That was not the skit. I did not produce it. Yeah, I mean, it involves my children. Okay, we'll give it 10 more seconds.

Okay, Steph, come on up.

So, in the video, my kids play the other roles. They are actively refusing right now, which was just part of one of the roles, but we are going to act out four different little scenes. I'm just going to need one or two people who are not afraid of hugs. Okay, JC. Oh, Brittany, you want to come up too? We need a couple of people. Yeah, both of you.

Oh, yeah. Okay, let me just prep the people.

Okay, so stick with me.

Okay. Here we go. Number one.

Ah, okay. Now, number two.

Okay, yeah, yeah. Number three.

Tracy signed up for that, though. I have to say an unnamed, almost teenage daughter of mine was awesome at that.

Okay, and here's number four.

Okay, thank you very much.

You don't have many chances to clothesline elders at church. But you know, this is how I have fun. So, what was that? Other than technical difficulties? And clearly, I've been missing like physical interaction with people. What did you see? What was that showing? Shout it out. God's embrace? Yep.

People choose to embrace God, what else? How they choose.

How different it is?

Yes, that was the idea I was trying to communicate.

Okay, now it's clicker time.

Yeah. So, I've referred to these as four different postures to God's embrace. And I'm sure there are other ones. But this is kind of what I started with, some of the main ways that we respond to God's love. And I just gave them names for ease of talking about them.

First, receiving. Carol received the hug. She gave a hug back.

The second one, I call tolerating. I mean, you could probably come up with something else. But you know, Brittany was there but wasn't really lined up.

The third was refusing. Tracy, that was pretty clear. We can just walk past. You did good, you did good. We praise you.

The last was interfering. Sometimes we feel the need to block others from receiving the embrace, because of how we understand the embrace. Right?

So, why am I focusing on hugging it out? It's because I want to look at Luke 15, the parable of the lost sons. We use this passage to understand a lot about who God is, God's reckless love, God's invitation, God's call out to all who are weary that all are welcome. Yes. And for many of you, that's exactly where you are. You need to know that God is ready to embrace you. I just want to add a little end to that, yes.

This may not be where you're at. But I just want you to listen and hear what God speaks to you. And the end is, I believe there's a part we play.

This is my theology. Some churches believe that God inspires faith in us, and that there really isn't truly free will to accept Christ, that even the faith, or the desire to follow Christ, comes from God. And so, we really don't have that much of an option.

I disagree, and maybe I'm misunderstanding how other people believe. That's fine. I believe, though, that we do have a choice in how we respond to God's embrace. In my life, I've seen moments where I could choose my own adventure, where I could lean into God as the center of my life or not. Sometimes I did, and sometimes I didn't. So, I believe the part that we play has to do with our posture toward God, our response to the embrace of life being offered to us.

As we celebrate Advent, remembering God's ultimate act of reaching out to us, I want us to think about how we can prepare our hearts to receive our King. It's a little Christmas song shout-out. Okay. So, we are going to go through this passage. I tried to keep it to four slides, but Dana told me it was too small. So, we're probably at like 30 slides for these 20 verses, but bear with me. It's a story, so I didn't feel like cutting it up. So, 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, as younger sons tend to do. 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 out to 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."

So, typically, the heading added to the text here says, "The Prodigal Son," or "The Lost Son," but really, this is a story of two sons and their response to the Father's embrace. It's putting into a story two of the scenes we saw earlier.

So, let's think about the sons, starting with the first one. Notice that Jesus is emphasizing how actively the son is losing himself. Earlier in the passage, Jesus told stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin. There are kind of three stories right in a row that are telling the same message. But the sheep and the coin in the parables don't really carry responsibility for being lost. The sheep gets lost, but honestly, sheep are really stupid. It wasn't trying to get lost; it was just lost.

And the shepherd went and found the sheep, and sheep don't do anything to be found. In the same way, the coin probably has the least responsibility. It can't be blamed at all. It didn't get itself lost, didn't choose to be lost; it just fell, and the owner lost it. So, it requires the owner of the coin to look for it, to do the finding. But this son is a different case entirely. Jesus goes out of his way to emphasize that he deserved to be lost. But his misfortune was an appropriate response for what he had done. If Jesus would have stopped at verse 16, with the young man longing for pig slop, many of the listeners would have been very comfortable with the story. Right?

The son got exactly what he deserved. He was a jerk. He wished his dad was dead, took his money, wasted it, and then lost it all. The moral of the story: Don't be a jerk to your dad. Right? Like, this is what that was a very reasonable story that people were ready for.

So, unlike the sheep or the coin, the son does have some responsibility here, and in the same way, he needs to be part of the finding. So yes, the father longed to see his son thrive, but it was the son who needed to move back toward the Father for the transformation to happen. And so, we have in verse 17, he came to his senses. Right? He realized his situation, got up, and went to the Father.

And to me, this is the embodiment of joining the embrace God offers. That was the first scene. In the wider church, we have a word for this: repentance. And many of you might be familiar with the idea of repentance. However, it might carry a little baggage for you. When you hear the word "repent," what are some of the ideas you hear? Or think of? Judgment? Gnashing of teeth? How do you gnash your teeth? What else do you think of when you hear "repent"? Turn around.

So, for me, I associate repentance with a theology about who God is. Repentance can be associated with a narrative that God is keeping track of our mistakes, that God is spiteful, wants us to be ashamed, and that there's finger-pointing or church leaders pressuring people to feel bad about the things they're doing.

Repent or perish is a whole brand of Christian faith. There are T-shirts, symbols, and a favorite verse, all of which I looked up and kind of went down a little rabbit trail while in COVID quarantine this week. But that's not really the image that Christ is painting. In Luke 15, when he describes repentance, he's talking about a father running to embrace a son, throwing a party, and celebrating.

So, I want to help us just dig in a little bit to that image or posture that we feel is associated with repentance. And think about our posture toward God. In short, I'd like us to reconsider repentance as part of our regular spiritual rhythm.

One thing that I think is so powerful here is what God's embrace is. What does that mean? We have a picture of the father celebrating when the son comes home. Another way that this week, it kind of hit home for me was when I was in my bedroom by myself. This was the day I started quarantine, right after I'd been on a week-long work trip, so I was just kind of missing people. One night I was feeling low, and it was just me and Nathaniel at home. I could tell he was upstairs because he's not a quiet person.

And I had a thought. I wanted to connect with him somehow. I wanted to reach my fingers under the door of my bedroom and see if we could hold hands or touch. So, I got some hand sanitizer, and was thinking, what if he doesn't see my fingers? Or what if he's too busy or just gets distracted or doesn't pay attention? There was a lot I was thinking like, this couldn't really be setting myself up for disappointment here.

And so, I was thinking all these things as I inched my fingers under the door. And you know what? The moment they came out the other side, he grabbed them. He was right there waiting. And God just flooded my mind. This is my embrace. This is what it's like. I am right there. I'm not distracted, or pissed off, or too busy playing on my computer. I am right here waiting for you. Just put your fingers under the door, and I'll have you.

So, the first brother kind of gives us a picture of what it means to turn to receive God's embrace. Let's go. Number two, which one of the pastors did he have? He was probably in the interfering zone. He was so caught up in his frustration toward his brother, that he just doesn't receive the embrace. And as the parable ends, we're left with this character standing outside of a party with a lifetime of choices ahead of him. His father says, Everything I have is yours. And I think that's not just an inheritance perspective. It's like everything is here for you.

But the question is, will he embrace it? Will he receive it? Will he go into the celebration? You don't have to be a slave. You don't have to follow all my rules. I'm here for you. But you have to enter in. So, we don't know what happens to the older brother. Maybe he'll stay outside, but reconciled later. Maybe he'll just add another layer of hurt to the narrative that you can hear in his mind that he's unwilling to deal with. Maybe he'll lose himself just like his younger brother. But instead of being motivated by selfishness, he'll be motivated by an image of justice and righteousness that his father doesn't live up to. He has a picture of what he wants the father's embrace to look like, and he can't handle that it's not like that.

So, like his younger brother, the older brother needs to repent. He needs to recognize that his patterns of thinking, actions, and words are drawing him away from the Father. And unless he turns, he will not receive the embrace. Turning for him means swallowing his pride, welcoming his brother, and being okay with his Father's Grace. It's not easy. But that's the work he needed to do before joining the embrace. That's his repentance.

So those are two examples of the four postures I looked at. And so, I was thinking, let's get some new characters. Let's extend this parable and think about what it might look like for different responses to God's embrace. Picture a son, living in Westchester, and their father is in a nearby nursing home. The father calls and asks the son, when can I see you? I want to give you a blessing.

The son is busy. He has a job where he feels overwhelmed. At home, there are so many things to do that in the few free minutes he has, he just wants to relax. He turns to Netflix, social media, and sports, where his favorite team is finally doing okay. He doesn't have time for whatever a blessing is. So, day after day, his father texts, "Do you have time today?" But the son gives him a Disney Plus subscription, hoping that will help his father feel satisfied.

So, the child turns his back on the embrace of the Father. For him to receive the embrace, he needs to go and let go of his right to entertain himself. The right to relax after a long day needs to put the needs of somebody else ahead of his own. That's his own repentance. It looks different.

And now, one more child, just for fun. How about a daughter? The sister to the overworked man hears of her father's desire to bless her brother. "I'll go," she says. She comes to her father's room and he sits with her. "Smile, you are my daughter, the one I love. Come and receive your blessing." She comes to him and he holds out a check.

"Here's your inheritance. I hope you can enjoy the fruit of all I've worked for. I only ask you one thing. I want you to give half of it to somebody else." She looks down at the cashier's check written out for \$250,000, more than she's ever had, enough to pay off her student loans. A weight that has dragged her financially for years. It's a dream come true.

She hugs her daddy and can't wait to cash that check. But when she gets to the bank, the cashier informs her that she wouldn't be able to withdraw any of it until half of it was pledged as a gift. She got angry. Did her father really withhold this gift from her? Did he not trust her? He knew that giving away so much would still leave her in debt. Was this some sort of joke? She snatched the check from the cashier and stormed out of the bank. She was willing to receive the blessing but was unable to orient her life to align with the generosity of her father.

Entering the embrace fully for her is releasing the desire for wealth. It's reciprocating the values of the Father to others, not begrudgingly, but out of love. This, to me, was kind of an example of the half hug, right? You can receive it. But without fully turning, without orienting yourself and really engaging in that embrace, you're not going to have all that the Father offers. So, these are just stories I made up. And obviously, even as I came up with them, I thought, well, this isn't quite Jesus, obviously. But setting that aside, I feel deeply that God wants us to know, the joy of his embrace. Unless we shift our orientation, our subheading, centering on gardens that have what we want, whether it's my comfort, my ease, my well-being, we simply won't receive it.

We need to each discover our daily repentance. And to me, that's what Tracy was trying to steal my sermon earlier. That's the idea. There are riches here, but we have a role to play. We can unload that back, we can think, oh, yeah, I should get rid of this load. But there's a lifting of our head that God asks of us.

That can be hard. It's not easy to confront your own issues. And I think this is a challenge that we have, that today's society, there's kind of a movement away from shame. And I think that is so healthy and good. But with that, some people can feel a movement away from the discomfort of recognizing your own mistakes. I know, stuff comes home, and tells me about students, a lot of things about students. Some things, some people are just unwilling to admit responsibility for anything.

And I think it's part of the air we breathe today, we recognize that saying that somebody shaming you, that's just wrong. And that feeling isn't something we need to carry. But at the same time, we need to separate out the element of recognizing our own brokenness and saying, "I am loved. I am welcome at God's table. But there's something that needs to change here."

I can hold those intentions. I don't feel any less love for the Beloved child because of that. God's right there on the other side of the door, no matter how far we run. But we still need to come to that hard place and say, I'm willing to accept the embrace. And so, I could talk a lot more about different thoughts I had about this. But I want to end instead just by thinking, just by taking a moment here.

Listen to what God is speaking to you. I want you to think, ask yourself this question: What is my posture towards God's embrace? It could be different in all sorts of elements of your life, it might look different in your workspace, it might look different in your family space or in relationship to one family member to another. We have a lot of different postures towards God. That's okay.

Just want to take a minute or so to start that conversation. And to listen to what God is asking you to do in response and proceed. Maybe you're still here. She is not still here. Maybe we can just put a little music underneath just for a minute. Thank you.

The idea of connecting with receivers. This is one of the reasons our understanding of God needs to be able to hear what God is speaking to us and be honest with God about where we are, to be able to walk out this life of faith.

But there's such a beautiful love on the other side of that door. I was just thinking we were praying earlier in talking about when I was, again, in a quarantine zone, it takes you to deep places.

When I lost my ability to do just about anything, to make my face, to make myself feel good. It all felt just so empty. And in some of that, I just couldn't eat because my tongue was giving me pain and so like, all the things that I turned to, to satisfy myself just weren't there. And all I had was God, just for a few days.

And it reminded me of how meaningfully beyond words, the satisfaction, the love of God is beyond what we get from our team winning a game or our side making a funny point in a meme, or even a good meal.

Those things can be good, but I use those so often to distract myself, to just take the edge off when what I need is something deeper.

And so, this week, as we prepare ourselves for Christ's coming as we celebrate Christmas, I pray that you can have a moment where you dig into this, where you can say, I know that what I need is to just connect.

If there's anything there where you need to change your posture, where you can hear it, where you can come to your senses, where if there's a story what Tracy was saying about a story in your life that needs to be replaced by the true story.

I had a wall like two pages on that. And you said it so nicely, entering into the embrace, just accepting God's story over us and over everything.

Anyway, I hope you have the opportunity to do that this week. Because that is the life that God wants for us. That is the invitation that is represented by Christ's birth. Coming here to be with us.

Amen.