

“WELCOME HOME” LUKE 15: 11-32 A SERMON FROM REV. KEN MACARI

In your worship bulletins is a reproduction of “The Return of the Prodigal Son” by Rembrandt. We will be referring to this work of art throughout this message. Let us now imagine ourselves this morning in a very warm climate—not in the Bahamas, but in the Middle East—the current Israel and Palestine. We are in a village where many people have gathered to hear the teachings of a young carpenter turned prophet, Yeshua (Jesus) from Nazareth. Jesus tells parables, stories to shock people into glimpsing their God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in new ways—to challenge them experience His love for them and others in very challenging ways.

In the culture of that time and still today in the Middle East, for the younger son in this parable to demand his share of the inheritance is tantamount to saying “Dad, drop dead!” It is more than an insult; it is invoking a curse from demonic powers. For a plantation owner to grant this is tantamount to accepting that indignity and breaking social norms. For the younger son to squander his inheritance in Gentile territory and then hire himself out to a pig farmer is breaking the Abrahamic Covenantal rules on kosher eating and ritual purity. For him to decide to return home is risking the same permanent rejection as lepers, tax collectors, Samaritans and shepherds. Even bad Jewish boys do not plunge themselves into this sinkhole! Those who listened to this parable would have been aghast at this. Those who listened to this parable would be looking around nervously at others in the room as they wondered who was ritually clean and unclean in the mind of Jesus.

Let us look now at the painting. Notice the Father in the red cloak. A plantation owner, a village patriarch in that culture and now in the Middle East walks with dignity. He does not run as would his farm hands or house servants. He does not run down the road outside the village to greet his swine smeared ingrate son to welcome him back. Notice his hands around his son’s shoulders. The right hand is firm as is the Father’s forgiving strength. His left hand is the tender reminder of our passage from Isaiah 49: 14-16: **“Zion asks ‘Lord, have You forgotten us? Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hand’”**

The Father’s red cloak symbolizes the sacrificial rituals of calves, goats and lambs. It visually demonstrates that the Father is not ignoring the Younger Son’s depraved attitudes and actions. Rather, the Father is truly the minister of reconciliation pointing ultimately to Jesus’ later crucifixion, His atoning sacrifice for the sin of all humanity. Later on in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul proclaims in II Corinthians 5: 18-19: **“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ giving us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”**

Let us look now at the Elder Son in the painting. His hands are clenched together with contempt for the Younger Son and Father clearly portrayed in his face. The Elder Son’s refusal to join the celebration deeply embarrasses the Father and scandalizes the villagers who are guests. Maybe any of us here have attended a social gathering or a celebration

where you could feel the tension in the room. Once again, breaking social norms, the Father pleads for the Elder Son to celebrate. The Father again models reconciliation and assures the Elder Son that his bad actions and attitudes are, not only forgiven, but will be forgotten. The Father affirms his unconditional love for the Elder with the promise that his future share of the inheritance is guaranteed.

I want us to consider another interpretation of this parable. Pastor David sent an e-mail blast to all of us of a YouTube video. It was an eleven minute clip from the 1997 movie “Jesus of Nazareth” by Franco Zeffirelli. The scene opens with Matthew the tax collector formerly known as Levi inviting Jesus and the Twelve to his house for a dinner party. Peter goes into a tirade against Matthew and rebukes Jesus for accepting the invitation. The Twelve also warn Jesus that they will become ritually unclean for any future Temple and synagogue prayers if they attend. Without a blink, Jesus bluntly states “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” Jesus enters Matthew’s house sitting on the floor cushion with the Twelve and several Pharisees standing outside next to the open door. Jesus is surrounded by the social outcasts of the village as He begins the parable. During the segment on the Younger Son, the camera zooms in on Matthew. The camera next focuses on Jesus relating the Father’s actions. Finally, as Jesus tells of the Father and the Elder Son, the camera zooms in on the stunned look on Peter’s face. Peter then enters the house and embraces Matthew.

Okay, Rev. Ken, that was an entertaining look at the times of Jesus, So, now what? Well, today is the first celebration of the Lord’s Supper for 2017. We come to the table with many hopes. With whom do we identify as we hear Jesus say “Welcome Home?”

Do we identify with the Younger Son? Will we be welcomed home? Maybe we have made wrong and hasty decisions and actions? Or procrastinated on important decisions? Indulged in forbidden thoughts and wicked words? Maybe even downright evil experiences? Actions, attitudes and ambitions we regret OR wish we regret? To the Younger Son in us all, The Lord’s Supper says “Welcome Home!”

Do we identify with the Father? Have we been put in the position of reconciler in our families, at work, school, other social circles and maybe, even, in this congregation? This Presidential election season has created incredible dilemmas with some dreading strained holiday family gatherings. Some have even “unfriended” some “friends” on Facebook and have conducted outright social media verbal attacks. Maybe we are called to be ministers of reconciliation—The Lord’s Supper gives us the strength to say to all “Welcome Home!”

Do we dare to admit we identify with the Elder Son? Maybe we are not too sure we want to be reconciled with so-and-so? They have caused too much hurt in our lives. I understand that all too well with those who have hurt me and my family. Nevertheless, can we pray to Christ’s Holy Spirit, “Let me be willing to be willing to be willing to be reconciled? What might be those steps to take?” It is never easy. Keep this parable in our minds and hearts as we come to Christ’s Supper to hear “Let us proclaim Welcome Home to all in our lives!”

