

September 22, 2019

Luke 15:11-

Sunday morning. You and God are out in the parking lot having a chat, talking important things - Packers, Bears. You see some people walking up toward you and God, people you've never met before. You turn your head so those strangers coming your way can't read your lips. You ask God: "Who's he? Who's she? Who are they?" And what does God say? "Beats me. Never saw them before in my life." Then pretending not to see the strangers, he says: "If we want to get our seats, we better get in." Is that the way God welcomes us?

You and God are caught inside in the traffic jam at the top of the steps. You see some people walking toward you. You've seen them before, maybe for years; you've even talked with them before. But for the life of you, you don't know their names. So you nudge God: "Who's he? Who's she? Who are they?" And what does God say? He shrugs: "Beats me. Just smile and pretend. Smile and pretend. And make it quick." Is that the way God welcomes?

You and God are stepping into church. Someone greets you. You're not really friends; you don't know each other all that well. But they're being friendly, so they greet you and God. And what does God do? You know God, so many things to do, so many things on his mind. So with blinders on, he walks on by; too much to do, too much to think, no time to talk. Is that the way God welcomes?

You and God have found your seats. Good seats with a good view. You can see who's coming in. Then you see someone. You and God both know who it is. You scrunch your forehead and point a little. God scrunches his face and shakes his head: "Who do they think they are? Who do they think they are coming to church like that? Who do they think they are showing their face here after what they did? Oh, now they show up. Who do they think they are?" Is that the way God welcomes?

With a shrug, a scrunch, a turn of the back - is that the way God welcomes?

That's the kind of welcome I deserve. After what I've done; with the way I forget God and ignore God, too busy in my own mind; with the way that I make myself forgettable, the way I make myself a stranger in Christ's church, I deserve to be met by God with a shrug and a scrunch. And worse. I deserve to be sent off and forgotten by God. I deserve the welcome of hell. And no matter how many people tell us: "I'd rather be in hell with my friends than in heaven with the likes of you," the welcome of hell - the welcome of people in pain, the welcome of people bitter and angry and frustrated, the welcome of Satan and the demons - that's not a welcome to welcome. That's a welcome to avoid at all costs. But that's the welcome I deserve for the way I treat the all-powerful, all-holy God, the way I treat God like a distraction from what's really important in life.

And yet, today, Jesus shows us another kind of welcome. He tells the story of a man with two sons. The older son works hard. The younger son ... well, the younger son likes to play hard. He doesn't care about his father, his family, or the family business. He just cares about himself, making himself happy. He demands from his father his share of the estate: "Give me my share, now." And then he gathers up his stuff and heads off to ... where do people go to live the party life today? Vegas? Cabo? The islands? He sets off to live the party life, fun and games. He buys, he spends, he lives it up. The new I-phone, new X-Box, (instead of cooking) take out from all the new restaurants. He loves the new casino, the new drinks, the new drugs. He buys new friends and girl-friends. He buys; he spends; he lives it up. And then he goes bust, down and out. Money gone, fun and games over, his friends desert him. No friends, no food, he has to get a job feeding pigs, wishing he could eat the food he was feeding the pigs, but nobody gave him anything to eat - the pigs were eating better than he was.

Empty - empty-handed and empty-hearted - no food, no money, no friends, no hope, no life - ever feel that way? That's when - when he hit rock bottom - that's when the young man came to his senses. "My dad's workers have food. I'll go to my dad and beg him to take me back as a hired man." So that's what he did. He got up and went home to his father.

What kind of welcome could he expect? What kind of welcome did he

deserve? “Oh, now you want to come home. Who do you think you are showing up like this?”

But what kind of welcome did he get? While he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His father hadn't forgotten him; his father hadn't given up on him. He was waiting, and not just waiting, he was looking. And when the father saw his son, what did he do? He ran toward him, with his heart filled with love, with compassion - no snark, no bite, no bitterness. He ran to him and gave him a great big hug - “Welcome home!”

I'll say it again: the father ran to his son and gave him a great big hug. He didn't ignore him or put on a pretend smile. He didn't scrunch his face or turn his back. He ran to his son and gave him a great big “Welcome home!”

Your Father in heaven says the same thing to you - “Welcome home!” The welcome that the father in the story has for his son ... that's the welcome that your Father in heaven has for you! Even better, the welcome that the Father in heaven has for his Son Jesus, that's the welcome that your Father has for you! He welcomes you home, as his own! Yes, he welcomes you as right to be with him in heaven!

How can that be? Jesus! God sees you with Jesus. I don't mean that God sees you getting along with Jesus, and because he sees you getting along with Jesus, God welcomes you home with Jesus. No, we don't get along with Jesus that well. No, this is how God sees us. Instead of seeing our lives as the younger child - dirty, selfish, and lost ... instead of seeing our lives as the older child - bratty, proud, and just as lost ... God sees our damnable lives covered with the perfect life of Jesus. And he sees the death of Jesus - cursed on the cross - paying the price for your guilt, for my guilt, for the guilt of everyone out there. So with Jesus, God sees you and calls you: “Forgiven!” With Jesus, God sees you and calls to you: “Welcome home!”

Now what? Oh, it's good to have a place with God, isn't it? And it's even better to share a place with God. So let's share and celebrate! Let's share and celebrate together with a smile for each other. Let's share and celebrate together with a heart for each other. Let's share and celebrate

together with a welcome for each other - "Welcome home!" Amen.