

Luke 15:11-32
Block Party

Welcome everyone! We are excited that you are here with us today! My name is Grant Gardner, I am the Middle School Minister here at SOCC. And if that scares you a little bit, don't worry, I'm not going to make any of you drink soda through a sock or lick peanut butter out of someone's armpit. If you don't understand that joke, youth ministry in the 90's and early 2000's was a weird and crazy time. But, I am going to bring a little taste of the Middle here this morning. Every week we start our service with what we call Middle Memes.

(Middle Memes)

Now, what I'm actually here to do is conclude our 7 week series called "Block Party" that focuses on all these different moments in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus sits around a table and shares a celebration or meal with people. So many of Jesus' life changing teachings and powerful moments happen around some type of dinner party. And throughout this series, Shawn has been inviting our church to participate and host block parties in our own neighborhoods. Last week Shawn taught that God has graciously invited all of us to the table, and we cannot repay Him for it. What are we going to do with that invitation? One of the challenges was to go and share

that invitation with someone else, and so our hope is that for those of you who were here, you were able to do that. But before we get into today's message, I just want to take some time to pray and center my own heart.

(Pray)

Disney has done some retellings of the famous middle eastern story of Aladdin both through animation and through a live-action remake. Within both of these stories the main character Aladdin encounters a Genie that is forced to grant him 3 wishes. Through events in the story the genie reveals that people always promise they will use one of their wishes to set him free, but in the end their thirst for more power and greed always inevitably ends with them using all 3 wishes for themselves. A fantasy story, but there's a deep truth to be realized within it. How often do we tend to want the gifts and blessings of someone, just without the responsibilities or relationship? I mean this is a rhetorical question, so you don't have to expose yourself, but how many of us would rather go rent or buy something you need for a project rather than to just go ask a neighbor to borrow it because you don't feel like having a conversation. Or how often do we treat God like this? Whenever we need or want something from God we're all about being in the Word and praying to Him, but when life is going great, well...let's just

say life can get pretty busy. I mean we all know “friends” or family like this. They only ever call you up when they need something. Today, we’re going to be looking at a story told by Jesus today that has to do with this very idea, and my goal today is to challenge all of us, myself included, to not see God as a genie or a hospital call, but to see the blessing of an actual relationship with Him. I want you to see the blessing of the Father’s love towards you, and to stop comparing your story to others, but to see how God has uniquely met all of you out on the road with His extraordinary grace.

Jesus told many stories during His earthly ministry, and these stories are often called parables. And the point of a parable is that they have a point. There is a truth that the storyteller wants us to discover for ourselves. Jesus doesn’t just invite us to hear this story, but to experience it. In every parable or story Jesus tells, we are invited to examine our own hearts and be changed. Jesus is the greatest storyteller of all time, but what is recorded in our Holy Scripture isn’t just there to be a good story. Jesus is inviting us into a change of heart and then a change of actions. So our text today is found in Luke 15:11-32. Shoutout to Beth for reading part of this passage at the beginning, but don’t worry, the story doesn’t end there. If you’ve never heard this passage before, this story from Jesus is often

called the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but what we will be focusing on today is not just this wayward son, but also two of the more overlooked characters within Jesus’ parable: the father, and the older brother. The prodigal son is one of the most powerful stories in scripture on God’s redemptive love, but today, I want to acknowledge the true hero of the story, the father. In fact, my father-in-law always says that a better suited title for this parable could be the parable of “The Good Father.” As we read this parable, there was a book that one of my mentors Josh Reynolds let me borrow called *Poet & Peasant* by Kenneth E. Bailey, that was super insightful into the context and the cultural significance of this parable itself. This story was told by Jesus thousands of years ago to an audience that is different to us in many ways, and when we read it purely through our modern midwestern eyes, we can miss out on some things that really get to the heart of what Jesus is trying to tell us. I believe this parable can be understood simply and still teach us a great lesson, but I want to encourage you to go a little deeper with me here today even if you’ve heard this story a million times to see what the Lord wants to teach us here. So if you’re interested in learning more or even seeing some of the deeper layers than we don’t have time to get into today, I would encourage you to check out his book. So to pick up the story where Beth left off, she read in verse 16:

16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

The story then continues as this:

17 “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! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ 20 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.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “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. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.²⁹ 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.³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.³² 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.’”

As we analyze this passage it’s important to understand to whom Jesus is telling this parable. Who was the original audience?

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:1-2

So we get these two kinds of categories of people who are in the presence of Jesus. Tax collectors and sinners are one, and then Pharisees and teachers of the law are another. And these Pharisees and teachers of the law are muttering to themselves that Jesus would associate himself and eat with such horrible sinners.

And before you become too harsh on them, you have to understand Israel's story. Up until this point, God had allowed Israel to be conquered by other nations because of their great sin. All of the heartbreak and even Israel's current oppression from Rome had resulted from the people's failure to keep the laws that God had commanded them to keep. So the Pharisees were born out of most likely a good desire to see God's people return to His Words and His laws. But what might've started out with good intentions had spiraled into a people that oftentimes valued their position and influence over their actual dedication to God. Because of their dedication and intelligence, and overall wisdom, the Pharisees and religious leaders of the law were often well respected and looked up to by the general population.

So we have these two groups that on the surface could not be any more different. Horrible sinners and then the best of the best religious leaders. And there's an obvious division among them. The Pharisees despise these horrible sinners. I mean after all, Israel's downfall has resulted from the lack of following God's laws. If these people could just get their act together then maybe God would rescue them from out of the hands of Rome and deliver them back to their previous status as a great and prosperous nation. How could Jesus be aligning Himself with these people? So Jesus tells 3 stories to address the situation at hand, and we're going to be looking at His final story today.

In the very opening verses of this parable we are introduced to this father and his two sons. And from the very beginning, we see this situation that would've been shocking to the original audience. The younger brother asks his father for his share of the inheritance. Which might sound weird to us, inheritance is something you get after someone dies, but it's maybe not that weird to us. But, to this audience and the culture of that time, this would've been a horrible offense said by the son against his father. In his book *Poet & Peasant* Bailey says that in all his time traveling the Middle East and studying the culture, whenever he has asked someone would it be okay for a son to ask this of his father, the answer has always been

emphatically “No!” When he asks why, they would say it would be like telling your father you wish he was dead. Some people even said that the father should beat his son for saying such a great offense. So it’s here where we see our first offense of a son valuing the gifts or blessing of his father, over the father himself. They didn’t have cell phones back then. The son is not planning on staying in contact or relationship. He is only interested in his father’s inheritance.

But let’s continue on with the passage to see more. The younger brother then squanders this wealth in wild living, and then a severe famine hits the land and he is in need. It’s at this point that we see the pride so clearly of this younger son. Because at this moment, he could go back to his father’s household and beg for forgiveness, but he instead hires himself out to a citizen of that country. The word used there actually literally means “glued” himself to a citizen of that country. And if you read the Old Testament pigs were one of the animals deemed unclean by God. The Jewish people were disgusted by pigs. I’ve heard historians describe how a Jew might’ve viewed pigs is similar to how many of us would view a street rat or a cockroach. And so this son is so desperate that he desires to eat what the pigs eat. If Jesus was telling this story to us in our terms he might even say he longed to fill his stomach with the scraps the cockroaches and rats ate.

He was in a very bad place, but his pride was so much that instead of going back home, he hired himself out to this random citizen to feed unclean animals and basically starve. But in verse 17 Jesus tells us that he finally came to his senses. The younger son begins making this apology speech in his head and what he's going to say to his father when he returns home. And at the end of what he's coming up with in verse 19 he comes up with the proposal that he is not worthy to be called a son, and so he is going to beg to be one of his father's servants. And then we fast forward to see that while he was still a long way off His father sees him and runs after him to meet him. His father embraces him and kisses him. And then the son gives his speech to the father in verse 21, but did you notice what he leaves out?

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”

After experiencing the Father's radical love the son no longer begs to be a servant, but embraces the gift of being a son. You see, at that time when someone desired to repent or make reparations, they would often bring a gift or some sort of restitution offering. The son was completely broke and so all he had left to offer was his service, and we don't know why he chooses to not offer this service after embracing his father, but I want to

propose that perhaps this son understood that the father's love was a gift that he couldn't earn. His status as a son and the father's love were not things that he could repay his father. All he could do is simply be amazed at the father's love and accept the gift. And from this moment, the father doesn't stop there; he puts the best robe on his son, presumably his own robe and a ring on his finger, and he orders his servants to kill a fattened calf in celebration. Now once again, there's something we might miss as modern audiences, but killing the fattened calf would've been a waste of a lot of food if it's just the family eating it. There were no freezers back then, so that meat is going to need to be eaten or it's going to spoil rather quickly. Killing the fattened calf would've been cause for a neighborhood type of celebration. Traditionally, music would begin playing as the meal is being prepared to alert the surrounding people that a great feast and celebration is about to take place. People would funnel in and out, and it would be a great feast. This was a culture that is centered around the ideas of family, community, and hospitality. It is also a culture that heavily deals with honor and shame. If you were here last week, you would remember that it was a great insult to a host to not attend such a celebration. So as this party commences, we see our next great insult to the father. In verse 28 the older brother upon realizing the occasion for the feast refuses to go

in. This would've been another very public insult to his father. If he disagreed with his father in this manner, he should've attended the party, done his responsibilities, and then argued with his father in private after the matter. But instead, he chooses to very publicly shame his father. And the expectation once again, would've been that the father shamed or beat his son for such an insult, but instead, we see the father's great character on display. He goes out to meet his son, and he pleads with him to join the party. When met with another devastating insult, the father reacts with extraordinary love. But instead of being changed by this extraordinary love, this son doubles down.

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.³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹ "‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.³² 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 15:29-32

Do you notice his choice of words? Or lack thereof? He never calls him father, he simply says you. He never calls his brother, his brother, he says this son of yours. How does he refer to himself? He says I have been slaving away for you. The older brother denies his own sonship to the father. He compares himself to a slave. Although he has been in his father's household there is no relationship. He follows his father's orders, but he does so as a slave. He claims to never have disobeyed and yet, with this very act he betrays his father's love. And yet possibly his most revealing words are in verse 29: "yet you never even gave me a young goat to celebrate with my friends." The son has lived with his father. The father has invited a great celebration and feast for potentially the whole village. Wouldn't his friends and people be there? And then the father reassures him that this son coming back doesn't mean he will be losing out on his inheritance if that's what he's worried about. But, you see, while these things have been promised to the older son, he doesn't have permission to take them until after his father's death. Bailey records this line of thinking as follows:

Father: "All that I have is yours."

Older Son: "Yes, but I don't have the right of disposition. I own everything but I still can't slaughter a goat and have a feast with my friends."

Father: "Oh, I see, you also want me gone."

And this is the very core problem of the parable, and it's the core problem of all of humanity. We want the blessings of God, just without God in the picture. Paul Washer, a missionary and preacher says "Who doesn't want heaven? Everyone wants heaven. They just don't want God to be there when they get there."

The very first sin, Adam and Eve are in paradise and in Genesis 3 the serpent tells them that the fruit will make them like God. And even though they live in absolute paradise and harmony with God, being in control sounds just a little bit better doesn't it? It's the problem of both the brothers, they both want the blessings of the father, just without the relationship to the father himself. Although this son lived in close proximity to the father, he knew his fathers commands, and although he did many of those commands, he was choosing to not be anymore a son than his younger brother. In fact, although he is clearly angry and holds bitterness in his heart towards his younger brother, we can see in his heart that the older son desires to do his own type of partying and wild living with his friends. There may even be part of him that is jealous that his younger brother was just bold enough to do what he always wanted to do. And I think most of us,

when we read or hear this story, we don't often like to connect ourselves to the older brother. If someone came into the church and wanted to repent and turn to Jesus, I would wager to say that most of us would say that we would celebrate that as a good thing. But what about when that person dresses a certain way? What about when that person does good for a little bit, but then backslides into their old habits and they want a 3rd or a 4th chance? What about when everyone starts talking about that person and their incredible story and how many hearts they are changing for Jesus with their testimony and they no longer talk much about all the work you do to serve the church? Or you might not feel jealousy or resentment, but when you hear the story of the prodigal son, it makes you feel like all you have is this boring story of going to church every Sunday, and never really straying too far from God. Maybe, you found yourself wishing before that you had some big life crisis in which you ran away from God and lived wildly only to come back to Him, just so that you could have a story. It's a common thing I see in youth ministry a lot among students. Wishing we had someone else's testimony. But can I just speak to those people for a moment if that is you? The older brother, if he chooses to go back into that house with his father, has every bit of a testimony as his younger brother. And if you need help for what it looks like it goes something like this. "Although I never left

my father's household, and I would try my best to do his commands, I was only going through the motions. My relationship to my dad was nothing more than transactional and secretly I was wishing I could go off party in a distant land. I appeared like I was a son, but in reality I was acting as a slave. When I saw his love for my brother it angered me, because I felt like I had never experienced that kind of love myself living with him all these years. But then I realized, I didn't really love my dad. I had just been doing things to appear like a good son. I didn't realize that all this time I had been distant to him, but in the midst of that, and even in my pride, he met me outside even after I insulted him, and he welcomed me in as a true son with extraordinary love."

If you feel like you've done enough to earn God's grace, then you are sorely mistaken and I invite you to embrace humility. If you can't see where God has extraordinarily loved you and met you outside, then I'm afraid you're still outside the party looking in. And maybe you don't feel like you have a story to tell because you still haven't accepted the fathers invitation to come inside. This invitation is every bit as good for the older brother as it is for the younger brother. The father does not order his son to join the party, he pleads with him. The father is pleading with his son to put down the mantle of being a servant and to start seeing himself as a son. It's what

his younger brother had to do. It's a gift, and it cannot be earned. The greatest barrier to both of these sons' relationships to their father is pride. The younger son lays down his pride and accepts the gift of relationship to his father, and in doing so there is a great celebration of joy. But for the older brother Jesus masterfully leaves the end of the story with a cliffhanger. Will he lay down his pride and choose to go in? Or will he walk away forsaking his father's great love? I don't know what every single person in this room is carrying at this moment. For many of you, there are some very heavy burdens on your soul that are weighing on you. For some of you, you may feel like the younger brother. You have lived a life apart from God. You were the life of the party, but as every party ended and you went home you were left with deep scars and emotional wounds. You were left starving for meaning in this world, but no matter what you tried whether it be relationships or success, or pleasure, nothing left you satisfied. And now you find yourself here in a place of just utter brokenness. Maybe because of the things done to you or even the things you've done that you're ashamed of. If that's you, then there's a seat at the table. You don't have to clean up your act before you come to Jesus, you just have to set out towards Him with a heart of humility, and He will meet you on the road, embrace you with unfathomable love, and clothe you with a new identity.

You do not deserve to be called His son or daughter, but He calls you one anyway.

Or maybe for others of you, you have been here a long time. You come to church every Sunday, you're in a Bible study, you serve in the church and the community. You do all the things, and yet God feels so distant. And you might look around at some of these other people that have lived such openly sinful lives and they come to Jesus and they just seem so alive and on fire for Him now, and you long to feel that feeling too. But the father doesn't just want a slave, He wants a son or a daughter. All of those things are good and will bring you great joy and life, but only when you start doing them out of appreciation of God, not out of obligation. Will you put down your pride and admit that you need Jesus every bit as much as the people you are seeking to help do? This is my story. I get up here and I preach about Jesus and His love, and then just last week I yelled at my wife in front of a group of people, totally embarrassing her, and ruining my witness because I felt like she wasn't giving enough effort in pickleball. And that's just one example from last week. I am not Jesus, and I need Him every bit as much if not more than you do. Without Jesus, I am nothing more than a hopeless hypocrite, but with Him, I am a son of the Most High God. Without Him, I would never be able to stand on this stage with any type of honesty

and sincerity, but with Him all I need to do is point to the way, the truth, and the life.

“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

-Romans 3:22-24

Romans 8:37-39 NIV

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Is God the father in your life or just a genie in a bottle that you rub whenever you need something? Jesus stands at the door knocking, will you let Him in? Will you accept this great invitation of love and adoption into His family? Will you join the celebration of all those redeemed by His grace? Or will you continue to stand outside the party with anger and bitterness in

your heart? One choice leads to life and celebration, the other leads to starvation and eventually death. What will you choose? To join the party? Or to stay outside? There is no other option.