

SERMON

Welcome, Joe!

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Welcome to worship this morning. I'm glad to see you here. And I'd like to offer a special welcome to all our Joes in the congregation this morning. In fact, if your name is Joe, Joey, Josephine, Joanna, Jodie, even JoJo, stand and be recognized.

Because today, March 27, is officially "National Joe Day." I'm not kidding. I don't know who decides these things, but March 27 is designated- National Joe Day. It's a day to celebrate anyone whose name is Joe. In fact, today why not pick up the phone and call all the Joe's you know and wish them a Happy Joe Day.

Better yet, if you have trouble remembering names, in honor of National Joe Day, call everyone Joe today, and no one will feel left out or get offended. (Did you know there's a website – NationalDayCalender.com - that lists national days -like March 22 is National Goof Off Day and March 25 is National Waffle Day).

A few years ago, a national survey measured how well people liked their names. 21% of people said they disliked their names enough to consider changing them. So if you are part of that 21% that never liked your name, today is your day.¹ For one day only, you can change your name to Joe. You're welcome.

I think it's ironic that our Bible passage today, the story of a young man who wanted to make a major change in his life, falls on National Joe Day. He didn't want to change his name. He wanted to get far away from his family and hometown and make a new life for himself in a faraway place. Even if that meant hurting the people he loved the most. Even if that meant burning bridges and losing his way. Even if that meant ending up in a place he never imagined he'd end up in.

A university professor in Australia recruited 657 adults between the ages of 20 and 80 and asked them to share the ten biggest decisions they'd made in their life so far. The professor and the study subjects then sorted and ranked the decisions according to how often certain decisions were mentioned, how significant the decisions were during each person's life, and the emotions connected to those decisions.

I think this is a fascinating study because of what it says about the decisions we regret. The professor in charge of the study reports that, "The most enduring regrets in life result from decisions that move you further from the ideal person that you want to be." That makes sense, doesn't it? "The most enduring regrets in life result from decisions that move you further from the ideal person that you want to be."²

That's important to remember as we get into our lesson today. Truth is, **we've all made decisions that have moved us further from the ideal person God made us to be.** Which is a great definition of sin: moving away from God's perfect character and perfect will.

¹ "Do You Like Your Name?" by Arthur C. Brooks, *The New York Times*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/opinion/sunday/good-bad-first-name.html>.

² "I asked hundreds of people about their biggest life decisions. Here's what I learned," by Adrian R. Camilleri, *TheConversation.com* February 28, 2021, https://theconversation.com/i-asked-hundreds-of-people-about-their-biggest-life-decisions-heres-what-i-learned-154885?utm_source=join1440&utm_medium=email.

Romans 3:23 reads, “. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” So today’s Bible story is good news for all of us because it’s about a son who rebels against his family, asks for his share of the inheritance, and goes off to a distant country to start a new life.

In time he squandered his fortune in wild living and ends up broke and alone. And when a severe famine spreads throughout the country, he hires himself out to a pig farmer just to keep from starving to death. Feeding pigs was rock-bottom; the most shameful job a young Jew could have.

In Jesus’ parable this man had rejected his father, lost his inheritance, and brought shame on his whole household. According to Old Testament custom, he was worthy of death.

This is one of Jesus’ most known stories. But Jesus’ stories are never just about the story. Every story Jesus told is an invitation into God’s heart. If you’ve ever wanted to know what God is like, this story is for you.

And if you truly want to understand the nature of God’s heart, you need to look at Jesus’ audience is. Jesus never told stories to entertain or instruct. Jesus told stories to draw people closer to God and was very careful to choose the right story for the right audience.

So our story begins with the words, **“Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ Then Jesus told them this parable...”**

What do these verses tell us about God’s heart?

Jesus is telling his audience of outcasts, “God welcomes you.” You’re important to me. Not as a project or a charity case. As a friend. “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Paul Tournier was a Swiss physician, counselor and author who became famous for his books on patient care. Tournier believed that physical, emotional and spiritual health were interconnected, and he focused on addressing the whole patient in his medical practice. His methods were so effective that doctors from around the world came to learn from him.

Tournier once wrote, “It is a little embarrassing for students to come over and study my ‘techniques.’ They always go away disappointed because all I do is accept people.”³

There’s healing in acceptance. Jesus’ interactions with others were remarkably open. He noticed people others overlooked. He touched people judged untouchable. He had no walls around him. And this openness caused the local religious leaders to view him with suspicion and contempt. Even today, we struggle to accept and love people as they are. Even today, the kind of love Jesus demonstrated is radical.

Jesus found the people nobody else loved, people who had been told that God couldn’t love them, and loved them. He made them the center of his attention. He made them the good guys in his stories. That’s the whole reason he was telling this story.

Ron Baptiste is a biker who became a Christian while serving a short stint in prison. When he got out of prison, he couldn’t find a church where he felt comfortable. So Baptiste started his own church, Covenant Confirmers Ministries, near Nashville,

³ <https://therocketcompany.com/10-new-preaching-stories/>.

Tennessee. Covenant's members include former addicts, gang members, prostitutes, even a local police sergeant.

Tommy Hollingsworth, a Covenant member who also spent time in prison, says of his church, "You don't have to clean up. You just get connected to God. Anybody is welcome here. Anybody."⁴

Just get connected to God. That was the point of every one of Jesus' stories. That was the point of his life. That's what led him to the cross - to connect us with God. This story tells us that we are welcomed.

It also tells the audience of outcasts that "**God is waiting for you.**" Jesus continues with his story: The son in this story is starving and desperate. So he decides to head home and beg for mercy.

He knew he had destroyed any chance of rejoining his family. He'd destroyed any chance for forgiveness. But he thought to himself, "I'll confess my sin to my father, and I'll ask him to take me on as a hired servant."

If you've ever thought you've gone so far away from God's ideals that you're no longer worthy to be called God's child, you understand the younger son's decision. But hear this: Jesus says, "**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.**"

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. The father who had been rejected. The father who had been shamed by his son's actions. That father was standing at the window waiting for his son to come home.

That's how he saw him when he was still a long way off. That father didn't wait for his son to make the long journey to his doorstep alone. That father didn't wait for his son to repent or apologize. That father didn't wait to see the red, swollen, tear-filled eyes or the young, hardened face now haggard from hunger and shame. While the son was still a long way off, that father ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

A five-year-old boy made a ceramic dish as a Christmas gift for his parents. As he gathered up his things to go home on the last day of winter term, the wrapped gift slipped from his hands and hit the floor with a crunch. He froze, then burst into tears. He had ruined his parents' very special handmade gift.

The father tried to comfort him. "Don't cry, son. It doesn't make any difference." But the mother lifted him into her arms, held him close as tears ran down her cheeks too. And when the boy finally calmed down, she knelt down and said, "Let's pick up the pieces and see what we can make out of what's left."⁵

God is waiting to welcome you home. God is waiting to restore you. No matter how you may have strayed from God's character or God's will, God is saying through Jesus, "Let's pick up the pieces and see what we can make out of what's left."

⁴ "Motorcycle church" by Amy Green, *Good News*, May/June 2005, pp. 28-29. Originally published and copyrighted in The Tennessean, 2005.

⁵ Paul W. Powell, *Jesus Is for Now!* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985).

And this isn't just a moment of restoration, it's a moment of celebration! Remember how Jesus' story ends: "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."

God will never give up on you. You are accepted. You are loved. You are welcomed. You are waited for. That's the message of Jesus' life. That's the motivation for his death. To show us that God will give everything He has to save us, restore us, and bring us home again.