

Who We Welcome

Luke 15

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on March 27, 2022

The story of the prodigal son pretty much preaches itself. Come home. The shape of all of Christianity is no more complicated than those two words: Come home. We have, each of us, traveled far from the purposes for which we were created. We have squandered the gifts we have been given. We have pursued what we want over what others need. We are broken and always finding new ways to break again. But the call of God made clear to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ is this: Come home. There is no distance too far from which you cannot return. There is no sin so great that it cannot be forgiven. There is no condition of your soul too tarnished that God is not able to shine it into something more precious than gold or silver. Come home. The promise of God is that you will be met with the loving embrace of a Father. You will be clothed with a robe of forgiveness. You will be decorated with a new and beautiful purpose. You will be given good work to do. You will experience new life, life after death—new creation. And perhaps that's all the sermon you need for today. Come home. Perhaps you've come home a hundred times before and yet you find yourself in a distant land once again and you're wondering "can I really come home 101 times?" The answer is yes. There are no exceptions or asterisks on God's promise of loving embrace. Come home. If that's the only sermon you need today, put on headphones for the next ten minutes.

Because I have a more different sermon for the rest of you. The default reading of the parable is that Israel is the prodigal son and God is the Father. The second way of reading the parable, very closely related to the first, is the sermon I already gave—we as individual Gentile sinners are prodigal sons, and the God revealed to us fully and finally in Jesus is the Father. But I want to preach a sermon based on a third reading, which is that we, the Church, have an opportunity to be the Father for a world of people looking for a home. Which is to say, we, as the Church, are invited to be like God.

I'm afraid I'm going to do an art thing again: Look at the image on the cover of your bulletin. This is a Chagall piece that we do not have, because, well, we can't afford it. Plus, the original is about 5 feet long and is owned by the Pompidou in France. This piece is called Exodus. It is, obviously, the people Israel fleeing slavery in Egypt to enter into their own land for the first time. Chagall has made two fascinating aesthetic choices on my reading. One, Chagall has chosen to put Jesus rather than Moses as the one presiding over their escape. And two, there is no red sea. Or, rather, if the sea is anywhere, it is out in front of the painting. The people of Israel are running toward the sea, but they're also running toward you, toward us, the viewers of the painting. The people of Israel have escaped the violent oppression of their past. The question is will we receive them with open arms, like the Father to the prodigal son. Jesus is showing you us posture to take.

But there's more to this painting. One can't help but wonder if Chagall has another Exodus in mind. In 1947, so after the the war and the Holocaust had officially ended but a couple years before this was painted, there was a coastal passenger ship that got nicknamed the Exodus because it was used to transport over 4,000 displaced Holocaust survivors to Palestine. Except while the ship was still a good way from shore, it was surrounded by British Destroyers and was refused entry. The British rerouted them to France, hoping to make them someone

else's problem but the Jews were so motivated to go to their homeland that they refused to get off the boat and instead went on a hunger strike for over three weeks. The French authorities refused to remove them by force. And eventually, the British moved them again, this time to British-controlled Hamburg, Germany where—guess what the British did to them—interned them in camps. You can just see a boat in the upper left corner of the painting. This makes the image quite a bit more pointed. An entire nation of hungry, fleeing people—not ancient but contemporary people—are staring at Chagall's increasingly Western, even British, audience, saying, "Why won't you welcome these people like Jesus welcomes them?"

We might see in this painting a different reflection still when held against our current circumstances. We might see not the faces of ancient or mid-century Jews but the faces of the people of Ukraine. This, of course, moves beyond the imagination of Chagall but probably not quite as far as one first thinks. Remember, Chagall himself was from what is now called Belarus. His own Jewish village of Vitebsk was occupied and mostly destroyed by the Nazis. It was the reason he fled to the west. Prior to WWII, Ukraine had one of the largest Jewish populations in the world. Some of the very worst horrors of the Holocaust happened within its borders. And still today, a significant Jewish population endures, including President Volodymyr Zelensky. Which is all to say, the western world is facing another Exodus painting moment right now, as a nation of women and children flee violent oppression, the question will be before the powers of the western world—will we welcome them or not?

And, I should be clear, these aren't even prodigals who put themselves in these miserable circumstances. They're refugees who did nothing to deserve it. Of course, Europe will face the biggest burden on the refugee front. Biden's promised 100,000, while a fine start, will just be a drop in the bucket in the end. And of course, all of this will only effect us on the south side of Austin, Texas so much.

But I have good news for you. God doesn't call us just to welcome Ukrainian refugees. God calls us to welcome everyone. There are many issues we face in today's world where there is lots of room for us to disagree as Christians. We can disagree about politics. There is even room within the Christian tradition to disagree about war. But who Christians are called to welcome is not one of the things where there is room for us to disagree. Christians welcome everyone. Friends. Refugees. Enemies. Children who squandered their inheritance. Everyone. There are no asterisks or exceptions.

This is one of the reasons that we at St. Mark's are such big fans and supporters of Community First Village. There are two central innovations that make Community First such an impressive place. The first is that they are trying to solve homelessness by—get ready for it—giving people homes. But that radical decision often overshadows the second thing that makes them utterly unique, even though it's right there in the name. The second innovation is that they are trying to help people suffering from a whole variety of problems, including homelessness, by giving them community first. In order to move into the village, you don't have to fix yourself first. You don't have to meet some exhaustive and demanding list of stipulations. You just move in. You're just welcomed. And their philosophy that has turned out to work miraculously well, is that the other stuff tends to sort itself out along the way.

That said, there's better news still: You don't even have to travel all the way to East Austin to experience this Christian form of welcome. Under Mother Mary's winsome direction, St. Mark's has been helping an Afghan

refugee right here in Barton Hills over the last few months. You can get involved with any of our mission partner organizations.

Actually, sometimes you don't even have to leave this church. Do you know how hard it is to try a new church for the first time? You have to wake up early on a Sunday, for one. You have to drive. Sometimes even get kids in the car. All to what? Show up to a place where you know nobody, where everyone else knows one another, where you don't know where the bathrooms are, or if they even work, and all because why? Because you're curious about God? Is there anything more embarrassing to admit out loud in today's world? The rest of us come to church for a hundred reasons. To see our friends. To eat tacos. To send the kids to the nursery so we can experience a few minutes of quiet reverence. But coming for your first time? There's only one reason, and everyone else is going to know it.

Let me tell you a hard thing. I have had two conversations in the last week with people who have told me they or someone they knew visited St. Mark's and that not a single person said hello or introduced themselves. Now, I like to think that's the exception to the rule. I think many people experience St. Mark's as a warm and welcoming place. But I also know to be suspicious of my own perspective because I'm so on the inside track here. I know it's genuinely difficult to experience a place as an outsider when you are an insider. To say nothing of the fact that some people are easier to welcome than others.

This sermon is based on what you might call a Russian nesting doll theology—or, actually, let's just call it nesting doll theology: that if you want to know what God is like, you should look at Jesus. And if you want to know what Jesus is like, you should look at his followers. After all, the Church is called “the body of Christ.” The problem with our nesting doll theology, though, is while the first two layers of that nesting doll are practically identical, this third layer is usually a pretty steep downgrade in quality. Kind of like that famous hundred year old fresco of Jesus that was “restored” a few years ago that went viral because it was so bad. That's often what the Church looks like compared to the original Jesus. This is why many people struggle to get on board with Christianity. In the words of modern history's most articulate atheist, Friedrich Nietzsche, “ I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked a little more redeemed.”

But a failure to adequately imitate Jesus is not an excuse not to try. The truth is we don't have any other option than to keep trying. And we don't try because in doing so we think we earn our own salvation. We try because there's no better way to do evangelism. There's no better way to show people what our God is like than to act like God towards them. And we try because in trying, we experience new life. We experience new creation. Ultimately, we try because it is not just the prodigal son whose heart is overjoyed by the embrace of his father. It's the father's joy too. Welcoming others, even those that are not so easy to welcome, perhaps especially those who are not so easy to welcome, is a uniquely Christian joy. Welcoming others is a way of experiencing God's embrace for ourselves. It's our own way of coming home.

Amen.