



Sunday September 10, 2023 (Welcome Home Sunday)
Luke 15:11-24 (Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

How does it feel to be welcomed into someone's home? I think most of us would agree that it feels pretty good, right? But I'm also confident that most of us can relate to being welcomed into someone's home and *not* being sure just how welcome we are? You know that uncomfortable feeling when you're not really sure what privileges or freedoms you have, like, can I open any door or go into any room? Where do I sit? Do I have to take my shoes off? Can I kick my feet up on the coffee table? Which bathroom can I use? What can I do in the bathroom? Do I get my own water glass? Or do I have to wait for everything to be served to me? We know what it feels like to be welcomed in, but I think it's safe to say we also know what it feels like to be uncertain if we're *completely* welcome.

It's an entirely different feeling when we visit someone's house that we're close with – like a parent or family member. That feeling of being immediately comfortable. When we feel *very much* at home. When we know we have all sorts of freedom – to go where we want, get what we want, serve ourselves, take care of ourselves, open the fridge, get something from the cabinets, come and go as we please. And we all love *this* feeling of being welcomed into someone's home.

So today as we celebrate Welcome Home Sunday, I can't think of a better way for us to explore what it means to be truly welcomed than by listening to what Jesus teaches about God's radical welcome through the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

In today's gospel story we hear about an impatient and greedy son who callously asks his father for his inheritance and then quickly ventures off to waste it away on immoral and disgraceful living – only to end up homeless and destitute.

But when this wayward son finally resolves himself to go home and beg his father for mercy and forgiveness, what he encounters is a gracious father waiting and wanting to gift his son *acceptance* and *restoration*. The beauty of this story lies in the simplicity of the father's welcome – and if we're not careful we'll miss it.

In the parable we're told that while the son is still far off, the father sees him and is *so* filled with compassion that he runs to him to embrace and welcome him home. Notice that there is no shaming. No mention of consequences or conditions. No anger, no resentment, no barriers, no stipulations, no roadblocks, no red tape, and no hoops to jump through in order to be welcomed home and restored. There's only grace. Only love. And it's boundless, unconditional, and unrestrained. What would our lives, our families, our churches, our communities, and our world be like if the welcomes we received and those we extended mirrored this kind of limitless welcome?



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What does it mean for *you* to be welcomed? Welcomed home? Welcomed back? Welcomed in? When and by whom have you experienced welcome? And how did it make you feel? We all desire to be welcomed – by our family, our friends, our neighbors, our community, our church, our colleagues, and even by those who are strangers to us. Being welcomed mostly makes us feel accepted, appreciated, valued, embraced, and even joyful.

And when we imagine the happiness, embrace, inclusion, safety, and comfort that comes from being welcomed home it not only brings reassuring peace, but also overwhelming joy. And this my friends is the very foundation of God's all-inclusive invitation – ALL ARE WELCOME!

We need only look to God's perfect example of welcome in the gift of Holy Communion. In this sacrament all are invited to gather around God's table of grace and experience the very heart of God's welcome – This is my body, take and eat, it is given for you, do this and remember how much I love you. This is my blood; it is my promise to you, and it has been shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins. But notice once again – there are absolutely no barriers to God's precious invitation into God's love, God's family, God's protection, God's guidance, God's support, God's encouragement, God's forgiveness – God's blessing.

Another important detail we shouldn't miss from today's gospel is that not only did the father welcome his son home, but as he did he also called for an immediate, joyful, and no expense spared celebration to take place. And brothers and sisters, *we* are invited to do the same. As we gather today around food, fun, laughter, and friendship in gratitude for the inclusion God offers to us, our celebration ultimately becomes an act of worship.

My friends, the gift of this multicultural church family, the ministries entrusted to us, and our very lives are all at their heart – *worship*. And as Children of God, isn't that our primary purpose to begin with? To worship the One who created us in his own image. To worship the One who was crucified, died, and conquered death for us. To worship the One who shows us over and over again that there is no limit to what God will do to welcome us home, welcome us back, and welcome us in. Perhaps then, our greatest act of worship could be to simply welcome the way God welcomes us. Thanks be to God! Amen.