

**“Welcomed Home on the Father’s Terms”**

*“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” Luke 15:20.*

With the spring break season underway for some schools already and many other schools anticipating spring break very soon, there are many welcome home moments happening. Some of those moments are with college students who decided to return home for the week. (I know we’ve already seen a few families here at Emmanuel experiencing this very thing.) Other welcome home moments will be for families returning from their vacations. And likely for many around this area, according to the unwritten Fort Wayne tradition, it’ll be a chilly welcome home from the warmth of those sunny, Florida beaches.

Whatever reasons and circumstances surround the home comings during this spring break season, there’s one thing that usually unites all of them. Those coming home want to be welcomed home on their terms. College students often come home expecting things to be the same as at school. Perhaps less structure, greater independence, freedom to come and go as they please without having to answer to anyone and so on. Families returning from vacation might want that iconic memory to boast about or at least if they’re coming from Florida, some sort of tan to show off where they were.

However, it’s not just those coming home who want to be welcomed on their own terms. Those that stay home over spring break want to welcome people back on their terms. Siblings of college students can get frustrated and upset with their brothers or sisters whose return messes up the way things had been working. Friends of the families who went on vacation for spring break, can mask their jealousy by downplaying the vacation stories they hear! Yeah, their trip didn’t sound that exciting, we can do all those same things here. They must have had bad weather because they don’t look like they got much sun.

While I highlight spring break homecomings, there are many other homecoming moments we all experience where we want to be welcomed home on our terms. It might be the simple, daily return home from work. Or it could be the more complex reunions at a former school or hometown. With each of these, we still have the desire to control how we’re welcomed home. Whether we’re the ones coming home or the ones receiving those who are returning it’s not hard for us to come up with our terms for how that welcome should go.

Jesus’ parable in our Gospel reading also highlights a homecoming. Although this story shares the return of a son to his father’s household, the details that Jesus provides reveal that this is no simple, ordinary return. There is a ton of damage and disrespect wrapped up into this particular return. The younger son didn’t leave on good terms. He made it clear that he valued his inheritance more than his family, especially his father. And the way he used his inheritance, according to the few details we have in the parable, reveals that he valued his fleeting, personal pleasures even more than his inheritance. Even with these few details, we would expect that any potential welcome home moment would require some very steep terms.

That’s what the younger son believed. After hitting rock bottom and experiencing a reality check, this younger son knew things could be different back in his father’s household, but he felt that he needed to return home on his own terms. Even in a state where he had nothing to offer, the younger son wanted to tell his father how to welcome him home. It’s a very bold assumption on this younger son’s part, to think that his servitude could begin to make up for the damage and disrespect that he had done to his family, especially his father. Dad, I don’t expect you to take me back as a son, but I do expect you to welcome me back as a servant. Those were the younger son’s terms.

Now the older son had different terms in mind for this welcome home moment that were just as steep. The mistakes of the younger son couldn’t just be erased or forgotten, they needed to be addressed. In order to welcome this prodigal brother back, he, the responsible brother, should be elevated. The return of this erring brother should make his faithful actions all the more valuable to the father. After all, the older son already lived like a servant without all the younger son’s reckless living. Somehow, someway,

his father had to recognize that he and this younger brother were no longer equal members of the family. Those were the older son's terms.

Neither of the welcome home terms of the younger son or the older son, were the terms of the father. Yes, the younger son's actions couldn't be swept under the rug, but those actions couldn't be undone by the younger son working things off as a servant. Neither would they be taken care of by using them as a way to create different levels of status between the two sons. Instead, the father chose to sacrifice and humble himself so that what was his might always be his sons'. With no regard for his dignity, the father sought his younger son while he was far off. Locating him, he ran to him and embraced him without any disgust for the state of his younger son and proceeded to cover his filth with the best he had to offer.

Then in a similar way, when his older son refused to join the celebration, the father, again, put aside his dignity to plead for his older son to return. Listening to his older son's anger and not retaliating to his older son's misguided ingratitude, the father pointed his older son back to the relationship and gifts that he and the older son had always shared. And what the father and this older son shared, the younger son could also come to know in his return. This was the reason for the father's joy! With his younger son's return, both sons could know him in the same way!

When we consider the original setting in which Jesus told this parable, it is very clear who each character applied to on that day. The younger son represented those tax collectors and sinners, while the older son represented the Pharisees and scribes and the father was God Himself. Once again, the Lord shares this parable on this day, and while the characters of the younger and older son are very much applicable still today, the truth is we might relate to the younger son in this moment only to feel like the older son later this week or even later today! So instead of jumping right to who we think we might be in this parable at this very moment, let's shift our focus to who we know the father to be – someone who doesn't change from moment to moment.

Even in this setting, the father is God. He is the compassionate, loving and embracing God who disregards His personal dignity to meet His children where they are in order to welcome them home on His terms. He welcomes us back each week into this sanctuary, into His house, not on our terms but on His! While we might think we enter God's house with a plan to make up for the sins of the past week, here in His house, He cuts us off before we even get to tell Him our plan. And those other times when we enter God's house upset with Him because we think He owes us extra gratitude and praise for how we did this week, especially in light of what others around us have done, He listens to our anger and redirects our focus away from what we think is lacking to what He has already given us well before we thought we deserved it.

Yes, God welcomes us home on His terms! Instead of letting us tell Him our terms, He tells us His terms! In fact, each time He brings us into His house, He shows us that He's already carried out His terms for us and now in this moment He delivers the results to us. His terms were carried out in Jesus! His terms were Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf. And the result of those terms is that we are covered with the robe of Christ's righteousness for the forgiveness of our sins. We are sealed for life everlasting by His Name in the waters of baptism. We feast in celebration of our salvation delivered to us in the Lord's Supper. These are the terms by which God our Father welcomes us home.

Whether we came to God's house this day with the terms of the younger son or the terms of the older son on our hearts, by our Father's mercy and grace we leave His house on His terms forgiven and restored because of His sacrifice and humility. We leave God's house as His children. We leave not seeking to be at odds with other children in God's family but seeking to be united as one family by the relationship and gifts our Father seeks to share with all His children. And we return again and again to this house welcomed home on our Father's terms and never on our own. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan