

**Sermon “Waiting at the Window”**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2025**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

It is strange thinking about the pandemic now and how much it limited us over a number of years. I take for granted the ease of travel and being able to sit down at a table and not feel like I have to do a head count, so I am not over the bubble limit. It prevented us from gathering as families or friends to share meals we look forward to throughout the year. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, summer barbeques—these yearly milestones are events we look forward to and cherish however, for a couple of years we could not experience them. Small things that provide comfort with their tastes and smells that are both nostalgic and anticipated. Potato salad never tastes the same as it does at my aunt’s cottage, and every summer since I have savoured it with a newfound sense of appreciation.

On a more serious note, food plays a key role in both our Old Testament and New Testament readings this morning. For the Israelites it was the first meal in the Promised land and in the account of the prodigal son and his older brother it was an extravagant banquet that became a lightening rod of controversy. Throughout the Bible hospitality through food and drink either offered or, in some cases not offered are significant. One of two sacraments we celebrate in the church involves breaking bread together, and countless other events include it as a sign of welcome and community. One of the ways we show we care for others is through a hot meal at the Upper Room or Christmas hampers in December. Meals bring people together and nourish more than just our physical bodies. I know this parable feels obvious and overdone, that was my initial reaction when I realized it was the reading this week. However, there is always something more to explore and it ties in closely with the story of the Israelites in Joshua.

For those gathered around Jesus listening this parable would have caused strong reactions. It would have felt like a bucket of ice water in the face because there is so much that

happens that is difficult to imagine. Jesus is saying “if you think the people, I spend time with are not worthwhile let me tell you an even more shocking story about how much God loves you.” In the biblical context the son asking his father for his inheritance before his death is essentially saying “I want what’s mine now, what you have built with your life means nothing to me, I want no part of it and I don’t have time to wait around for you to die, so give me what is mine.” The property divided between the two boys means that some of the father’s land was sold from the estate. This selling of land due to the outrageous and audacious request of a younger son would have heaped shame upon the family. The fact that the father does not argue, threaten, withhold, or refuse but instead quietly accepts the request and all the pain and shame it brings would be unheard of. Why would any father allow himself to be treated that way? The expectation would have been for the son to be disowned.

For the Pharisees and scribes who so carefully obey the laws the next part of the story is even worse. Not only does he travel to a foreign country and waste all his money in the most disreputable ways possible, but for this young Jewish man to have anything to do with pigs is bad enough—to feed them and eventually share their food would be unimaginable. Suddenly the tax collectors are looking like far better dinner guests. When they hear the young man decides to return home and beg for forgiveness perhaps their ears perked up. Surely this is where the parable begins to make sense. This is where justice will be meted out and an example will be made. However, it only gets worse. This dignified, senior father, who has had shame upon shame heaped on him by this young man runs to embrace him. That isn’t justice. The Pharisees blood pressure was likely through the roof at this point. Anyone listening would have been shocked by the scene Jesus just painted. “God loves you so much, that even when you have sunk to the lowest of low moments, he will come running to embrace you.” The young son recognized how wrong he was, he repented and returned home—that is all the father needs to know, and it is a cause for celebration.

N.T Wright explains that within this story there is another aspect we should not miss. In our reading in Joshua today we see the Israelites finally enter the Promised Land. While things begin well, they eventually fall away from their faith and after years of rebellion are carried off into captivity in Babylon. They have long ago forgotten the days when God provided manna and quail from heaven, they have forgotten the taste of that meal they shared after finally crossing into the Promised Land. While many of the exiles do return “most of Jesus’ contemporaries reckoned that they were still living in virtual exile, in evil and dark days, with pagans ruling over them. They were still waiting for God to produce a new Exodus, a liberation which would bring them out of their spiritual and social exile and restore their fortunes once and for all. For Jesus to tell a story about a wicked son, lost in a foreign land, who was welcomed back with a lavish party—this was bound to be heard as a reference to the hope of Israel.” Yet somehow news like this was not good news for the scribes, Pharisees or even eldest sons.

While the scene of a father running to embrace a long-lost son is poignant, it is the elder son who really drives the message of Gods love and mercy home. I want to be clear; the person I most often represent in this story is the elder son. I resonate with his point of view—following the rules, trying to do things right, this story would sit better if the younger son had to apologize and quietly step back in line—where are the consequences? Thankfully for all of us God’s kingdom is about mercy, love and abundance.

Sometimes in life it is easy to only see the bad and miss the beauty. I know when I am listening to the news, I often find myself weighed down by the negative and allow it to drown out the hopeful. In gardening we might only see the weeds that need to be pulled, when we create something, we might only see the areas that feel imperfect to us. When we do something or offer our time, we may feel inadequate. I know when I come home to a house in shambles because of two little boys I often only see the mess and lose sight of the fun they had in the

process. I see crayons and toy cars strewn around, playdough bits on the floor, and fallen block towers, I do not see the creating, pretending, and exploring that is far more important.

In Luke today both the eldest son and Pharisees are echoing the words “it’s not fair.” They are the ones following the rules, the letter of the law, fulfilling their duties. The eldest son misses the irony that questioning and accusing his father in front of their guests and refusing to come in is just as disrespectful as the younger sons’ previous antics. Again, the father looks at his older son, and the ways he is struggling and welcomes him back into relationship. I deeply appreciate what N.T Wright had to say when reflecting on this “At this point we sense that Jesus is not content simply to tell the grumblers that they’re out of line; he, too, wants to reason with the Pharisees and the lawyers, to point out that, though God’s generosity is indeed reaching out to people they didn’t expect, this doesn’t mean there isn’t any left for them. If they insist on staying out of the party because it isn’t the sort of thing they like, that’s up to them; but it won’t be because God doesn’t love them as well.” That is good news for everyone.

Luke is concerned about all feeling welcome in Gods’ family. In Lukes time Jewish Christians seeing Gentiles welcomed into the church was challenging. Throughout history the church has struggled to welcome all people. Today we are reminded in no uncertain terms that there is room for wayward sons, rule abiders, grumblers and everyone in between. There is always bread to spare in the kingdom of heaven. Take heart this Lenten season, and know that God sees you, knows exactly who you are, loves you, and even if we wander away, he is the anxious parent waiting at the window hoping to see us coming back up the driveway. Love like that is well worth the celebration.