

There are a lot of things that I love about trips to Disney World, lots of little moments that when combined make for my stalwart feeling that it *is*, in fact, the happiest place on earth. That quintessential Disney moment, that moment where it makes you feel like you're *there* is different for everyone. For many, it's that moment when you first walk down Main Street and see the castle. I remember one of my former congregants, who told me that if she could get to Disney she would skip right down Main Street, she didn't care that she was in her 80's. For some, it's that first moment on a favorite ride. For other, it's a specific food or smell. For me, it's a little different and not exactly the moment you would probably expect.

For me, that moment comes after the first long day at whatever park we find ourselves at, and we board that blissfully air-conditioned Disney bus to take us back to our hotel. There's a moment when the lights go out, everyone is instantly quiet, the day's exhaustion sinking in, and the voiceover starts coming over the loudspeaker. It tells you that you're on your way back to whatever hotel you are staying at and then there's this line, "So sit back, relax, and let us do the driving. You'll be home soon..." Those four little words, "You'll be home soon." It's like being wrapped up in a giant blanket, saying here in this space, you don't have to worry about anything. The day is done, shower and sleep is so very close, the air is cool,

and the rest of the world fully fades away. For however many days ahead, *this* is your home. This place full of magic and wonder is where you get to lay your head and feel comforted and happy. It makes me smile every single time, because it's just this nice, little, magical reminder that even away from home, this place *feels* like home. Here in the happiest place on earth you are welcomed home because here is a place where you should feel loved.

Home is an interesting concept in conjunction with our gospel lesson this morning, because while Disney's goal is to make sure that everyone feels like they are at home there, our gospel reminds us that sometimes even when you are at your actual home, you don't always feel like it. Sometimes, the concept of home is a matter of perspective, of feeling, of identity, of who you are when you're there, how you see yourself and how those around you see you while you are there. Sometimes *home* isn't as simple as where you lay your head at night.

Jesus is faced with angry Pharisees and scribes as he is in the midst of a meal with company that the leaders deem *unfit* for someone that associates with them. If you remember from the other week, we talked about the fact that the Pharisees aren't Jesus' adversaries in Luke, but are his sparring partners, their relationship defined by respect not enmity. There seems to be a little bit of a we don't want guilt by association thing going on

here, because after all the Pharisees and scribes also dine with Jesus, so if they dine with him *and* sinners dine with him, then does that put them on equal footing with the sinners? They can't tolerate such a connection. For them, there needs to be a distinct line drawn in the sand of those that Jesus should welcome and associate with and those who should be left out, those who should remain lost as it were. Jesus then proceeds to go through a series of lost and found parables. A shepherd looking for a sheep, a woman looking for a coin, and then this one, sons looking for home, a father looking for his children.

We know the story, the rhythm and flow of it. A man has two sons. The youngest son decides one day that life on the farm isn't cutting it for him and frankly his dad isn't dying fast enough for his liking so instead of keeping on with his sonly duties, he demands his inheritance so he can blow this popsicle stand and find a better life. As opposed to calling his son's atrocious behavior out, his dad lets him leave, money in his pockets. Except, the grass isn't greener away from the farm. He squanders his money and ends up living amongst the pigs, longing to share their food to ease his hunger pangs. He begins to long for home...but realizes that he can't see it as home anymore. If he goes back, he can't go back as his dad's son, he can't go back as anything other than a desperate man looking for a job and a

warm meal. He doesn't think he can return looking for home anymore, he can only return looking for security.

We know what happens...his dad sees him, the dust kicks up behind his heels, there is no question of security, of work load, of duty, there is only a hug, a kiss, a call for a party and those two little words underlying it all, welcome home. The youngest son didn't think this could be his home anymore, didn't think he could be a son anymore, and yet, his dad reverses all of that. He is worthy of home, he is worthy of being a son, his is worthy of lavish, unconditional love, because he has returned, lost and wayward only to be found, alive and safe.

One would think this is all good news. The entire concept of home and family restored as it should be, until you realize that even for the son who remained at home, home hasn't been exactly that for him either. Livid with the generous welcome his brother receives, not even his brother, his father's son, receives, he crosses his arms and pouts. *He* has never received this treatment! He isn't seen as a son around here, he is only seen as another hired hand, there to do the labor and work his dad demands, with nothing to show for it. For as much as the younger son didn't think he was worthy of being a son anymore, it appears that the eldest son never saw himself as a

son either, because in his mind, this kind of love his dad is clearly capable of bestowing has never been granted to him.

Just like with his brother, his dad restores to him the identity he has forgotten. *Son*, all I have is yours. Lavish, unconditional love is here for the taking. You are not a hired hand to me. You are my son, my child, this is your home, this is where you are seen, this is where you are cherished, this is where you are beloved for everything you are, even when you are feeling frustrated, angry, and never want to come in the house again. It's always there for you to step through the doorway and hear the same words as your brother, welcome home.

To our modern ears, with our ideas about consequences, getting what you had coming to you, and fairness, we hear this and may possibly think it's all ridiculous. The younger son deserved some punishment, the older son deserved some justification for his feelings. Love isn't fair, love isn't unconditional, bad behavior does result in a change of identity or status. This dad is out of his mind and has no idea how to properly handle things. Yet...the question I always raise in my mind when these modern principles start swirling in my head with this parable is, if in this scenario, the dad is God, do we really want God to operate how we think God should, or would we rather God behaved with all the irrationality of this dad with his kids?

Here's the thing though, it doesn't matter what we think when it comes to how God should behave. We can have all the opinions in the world of how we think God should treat us or others, and those opinions are pretty much inconsequential, because God is going to act how God is going to act regardless of what we think God should do. God is perpetually going to welcome the lost home, embrace the wayward, and lavish unconditional love on those who feel they are unworthy, those the world feels are unworthy. That is simply, how God rolls. No matter how far you have gone astray, God's response is always going to be welcome home. No matter if you think you aren't deserving of calling a place a home anymore, God's response is always going to be welcome home.

So, if God isn't going to change...what is the message here? The message is for us. The message is for us to rethink how we see ourselves, how we see others, and ultimately how we see God. We have all had those moments of being the younger son—gone entirely astray, pulled along by the lure of something bigger, better, flashier, more dangerous, more appealing. We have looked at God and looked at the world in front of us and said, peace out, the world looks better! And we have fled as fast as our feet can take us. We've lost ourselves in actions and thoughts that are less than stellar, and because of that, when we have those moments of coming

back to ourselves, we assume, God must see us differently. No longer as a beloved child, but as a wayward orphan who needs to be reminded of their place, further down the rung of God's love so that we can learn from our mistakes. Yet, this parable challenges us to remember that our identity never changes. God is always there saying, son, daughter, beloved child, welcome home, you were missed.

And when we're the elder son, angsty that God treats others how we think we should be treated or how we think they shouldn't be treated, God is there to remind us...this is who you always have been to me, but you haven't always been willing to see it. My love is always being outpoured for you, every ounce of me is yours, I cherish you, I love you wholeheartedly. You have always been home, welcome *home*, you are worthy here.

The challenge of this parable is to see ourselves and our siblings as God sees us. Not as worthless, messy, screw-ups who need to beg and plead for our place to be restored. Not as stubborn, blind, children who need to have their arms uncrossed for them. But as beloved, cherished, miraculous children who were lovingly created by God exactly as we are with all our foibles and fragility. You have a place. You have a purpose. You are seen. Here in this place, by God and your siblings. Today, may all who need to hear it cherish the words: welcome home. **AMEN!!!**