

Welcome to worship this morning. I'm glad you all are here. Did you know that today is officially "National Joe Day?" Yes, March 27th is "NATIONAL JOE DAY! I'm not kidding. I don't know who decides these things, like National Goof Off Day (March 22) or National Waffle Day (March 25), but **March 27 is designated as National Joe Day. It's a day for celebrating anyone with the name Joe.**

In fact, the founder of National Joe Day invites all people to change their name to Joe for this one day, so that everyone can experience the honor of being a Joe. For those of us who have trouble remembering names, National Joe Day is a great idea. It is a day you can call everyone JOE, and no one can get offended.

Years ago, there was a national survey measuring how well people liked their names, and about 21% of people said they disliked their names enough to consider changing them. So, if you are part of that 21% that has never liked your name, **today is your day.** For one day only, you can change your name to Joe. You're welcome.

I think it's pretty interesting that our Bible passage today falls on National Joe Day because it's a story of a young man who wanted to make a major change in his life. He didn't want to change his name. Instead, he wanted to get away from his family and his hometown and make a new life for himself in a faraway place. Even if that meant hurting the people he loved the most. Even if that meant burning bridges and losing his way. Even if that meant ending up in a place he never imagined he'd be.

It's like a 49-year-old man from Germany, Erwin Kreuz, who, in 1977 spent his life savings for a special trip to the magical city of San Francisco, California. The flight had a short layover in Bangor, Maine, before reaching its final destination. While on the layover, a flight attendant casually wished Kreuz a good time in San Francisco. She was unaware that the German passenger didn't speak English. He heard the two magic words "San Francisco," and assumed he had reached his vacation destination, so he got off the plane in Bangor, Maine, began touring the town. He wandered the streets of Bangor for three days before he discovered his mistake. A local family took him in. His story made it into the local newspaper, and a strange thing happened from there: the residents of Bangor, Maine, rallied around the lost foreigner. The locals threw Kreuz a 50th birthday party. The Penobscot Indian Nation named him an honorary member. A local songwriter wrote a folk song about him. The Bangor government gave him a small parcel of land in northern Maine. Even the governor acknowledged him.

Within a week, *Time* magazine published an article about Erwin, and the *Today Show* did a segment on the lost foreigner who received a hearty welcome in an unexpected place. Not to be outdone, the *San Francisco Chronicle* covered the story and paid for Erwin Kreuz's trip to San Francisco, where he rode a cable car, met the city's mayor, and attended a rodeo—where he received a standing ovation. One year after his whirlwind trip to the U.S., Erwin Kreuz returned to Bangor, Maine, for a visit with the folks who had so generously welcomed him to their town. And according to the local property assessor, he continued to pay property taxes on the land he had been gifted in Maine, even though he never came back to see it.

Wouldn't it be great if every story of being lost had a happy ending? And a lot of them do. But sometimes a trip to a faraway place takes us away from our sense of self, our sense of security, our source of strength. Sometimes a trip to a faraway place ends in brokenness or regret. **Sometimes we return not the person we want to be.**

I think it's important to point out before I jump into **our Bible story today that we have all made decisions that have moved us further from the ideal person we want to be.** We have all made decisions that have moved us further from the ideal person God made us to be. That's exactly what sin is: moving away from God's perfect character and perfect will. Romans 3: 23 reads, ***"... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."*** So, today's Bible story is good news for all of us.

It's about a son who rebels against his family. He asks for his share of the family inheritance so he can go off to a distant country and start a new life. The end result was he squandered his fortune in wild living and ended up broke and alone in a foreign land. When a severe famine spread throughout the whole country, the young man became desperate and hired himself out to a pig farmer just to keep from starving to death. Feeding pigs was rock-bottom, the most shameful job a young Jewish man could have.

The son in Jesus' story had rejected his father, lost his inheritance, and brought shame on his whole household. According to Old Testament custom, he was worthy of death.

This is one of Jesus' most famous stories. But Jesus' stories are never just about the story. **Every story Jesus told is an introduction to GOD'S HEART.** If you've ever wanted to know what God is like, then this story is for you. And if you truly want to understand the nature of God's heart, then always look at who Jesus' audience is. Jesus never just told a story to entertain or instruct. **He told stories to draw people closer to God.**

So, he was very careful to choose the right story for the right audience.

Our story begins with the words, ***"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable. . ."***

What do these verses tell us about God's heart?

Jesus is telling his audience of outcasts: "GOD WELCOMES YOU." You are important to me. Not as a project or a charity case. As a friend. "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Paul Tournier was a Swiss physician, counselor and author who became famous for his books on patient care. Tournier believed that physical, emotional and spiritual health were interconnected, and he focused on addressing the whole patient in his medical practice. His methods were so effective that doctors came from all over the world to learn from him. Tournier once wrote, ***"It is a little embarrassing for students to come over and study my 'techniques.' They always go away disappointed because all I do is accept people."*** That's interesting, don't you think? **"ALL I DO IS ACCEPT PEOPLE."**

THERE IS HEALING IN ACCEPTANCE. Jesus' interactions with others were remarkably open. He noticed people whom others overlooked. He touched people who were judged untouchable. He had no walls of acceptability around him. And this openness caused the local religious leaders to view him with suspicion and contempt. **Even today, we struggle to just accept and love people as they are. Even today, that kind of love is radical.**

In 1989, Mother Teresa visited Phoenix, Arizona, to open a homeless shelter. There was a huge celebration in the city of Phoenix to welcome her, with crowds packing the local Veterans Memorial Coliseum to hear her speak. She was also invited to do a radio interview on Phoenix's largest radio station, KTAR. Before the interview, the radio host asked Mother Teresa if there was anything he could do to help her work. He was accustomed to lending his celebrity to various charities or making donations to good causes. But that's not what Mother Teresa wanted from him. Instead, she said, ***"YES THERE IS, SHE SAID. Find somebody that no one else loves and love them."***

FIND SOMEBODY THAT NO ONE ELSE LOVES AND LOVE THEM! That's how Jesus lived his life. He found the people nobody else loved, the people who had been told that God couldn't love them, and he loved them. He made them the center of his attention. He made them the good guys in his stories. **THAT IS WHY HE TOLD THIS STORY! He wanted to show others that they could become connected to God NO MATTER WHAT!**

CONNECTION to God. That was the point of every one of Jesus' stories. That was the point of his life. That's what led him to the cross—just to connect us with God. **What does this story tell us about God? First and foremost, IT TELLS US THAT WE ARE WELCOMED!!**

The second thing Jesus is telling his audience of outcasts is: "GOD IS WAITING FOR YOU." Jesus continues with his story: The son in this story is starving and desperate. So, he decides to head home and beg for mercy. He knew he had destroyed any chance of rejoining his family. He'd destroyed any chance for forgiveness. But he thought to himself, ***"I'll confess my sin to my father, and I'll ask him to take me on as a hired servant."*** If you have ever thought you have gone so far away from God's ideals that you are no longer worthy to be called God's child, then you understand the younger son's decision.

Then Jesus says, ***"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."***

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. The father who had been rejected. The father who had been shamed by his son's actions. That father was standing at the window waiting for his son to come home. That's how he saw him when he was still a long way off. And the father didn't wait for his son to make the long journey to his doorstep. He didn't wait for his son to repent or apologize. He didn't wait to see the red, swollen, tear-filled eyes or the young face now hardened and haggard from hunger and shame. While the son was still a long way off, the father ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

William Muehl tells a story of a five-year-old boy who had made a ceramic dish as a Christmas gift for his parents. As the boy gathered up his things to go home on the last day of winter term, the wrapped gift slipped from the boy's hands and hit the floor with a crunch. The boy froze, then burst into tears. He had ruined his parents' very special handmade gift.

The father tried to comfort the boy. "Don't cry, Son. Don't cry. It doesn't make any difference." But the mother lifted the boy up into her arms. She held him close as tears ran down her cheeks too. And when the boy finally calmed down, she picked up the gift and said gently, ***"Let's pick up the pieces and see what we can make out of what is left."***

God is waiting to: WELCOME YOU HOME. God is waiting to: RESTORE YOU.

No matter how far away you may have gone from God's character and God's will, **God is saying through Jesus, *"Let's pick up the pieces and see what we can make out of what is left."***

And this isn't just a moment of restoration, it's a moment of celebration! WHY?

Jesus' story ends with these words: ***"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'***

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' AND THEN THEY BEGAN TO CELEBRATE!!

There is a story of a teenage girl who rebelled against her family and became very distant from them. One night, the daughter was arrested for drunk driving, and the mother had to pick her up from the local jail. That was one long, silent car ride home. The daughter could only imagine all the angry words her mother must be holding inside as they drove home. The next day, the mother presented her daughter with a small gift-wrapped box. **Inside was a rock.** The daughter rolled her eyes. "Cute, Mom," Said the daughter, "What's it for?" "Read the card," her mother said. Inside was a card that read, ***"This rock is more than 200,000,000 years old. That is how long it will take before I give up on you."***

God is never giving up on you. You are accepted. You are loved. You are welcomed and He will wait for you. That was the message of Jesus' life and the motivation **for his death—to show us that God would give everything He has to save us and restore us and bring us home again.**

Can you trust your life to a God like that?

I pray that you WILL commit your life to God and RUN TO HIS open arms. Amen.