



at the table

MEALS THAT TRANSFORM LIVES

## LOVING LOST THINGS

**Sunday 13 March 2022**

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Jesus did some of His best work around a meal. It was the place where He consistently confronted the spiritual and social divides. As John Mark Comer says, "Jesus saved people, one meal at a time". The problem we saw last time is that Jesus ate with all the wrong people! And one of Jesus' most memorable teaching on this comes precisely because He had gained a reputation for eating with the wrong people. The start of Luke chapter 15 reads, *"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'"* (Luke 15:1-2).

So, Jesus tells three stories to respond to the muttering of His critics on His habit of welcoming sinners and eating with them. Stories about precious, lost things: coins, sheep and then, driving it home, two lost sons (only the Pharisees think there is only one lost son). And did you ever realise how food focused it is?

*"Father, give me my share of the estate"* (Luke 15:12). The younger son takes half the estate and goes off to party in the far country like it's 1999. Jesus is describing here a person who has disgraced himself and his family at the most extreme level. I imagine Jesus' audience thinking, "how outrageous!" To ask for half the inheritance is the same as saying "I can't wait for you to die, I want to get on with my own life project, so advance me half of what I would get if you were dead and I'll be on my way." And, the father does! Which I suspect was just as outrageous - why would the father be so accommodating of his son's offensive behaviour?

The son heads for Byron or Bali or Bangkok and is living the dream: Instagramming his '#bestlife'. But what then happens? His dream becomes a nightmare. The vision of the good life he was building turns out to be not so good: *"After he had spent everything, (that's a lot of*

cash!) *there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need*" (Luke 15:14). He blew all his money and the good times ran out when the food ran out.

In 'National Lampoons Vacation', Clark Griswold's ultimate family holiday is to go to Wally World. Clark (Chevy Chase) has every detail of the trip planned and the whole story is that nothing goes to plan the whole way and when they finally get to their Wally World dream - it's closed. It's a comedy because, in some way, we can all relate to it. We all have a Wally World: a grand plan that became a grand disappointment. I reckon we all have in the past two years: weddings, holidays, special events... But for some, life feels like that all the time. I want to press this point a little further: the son was impatient to leave life in community to go get his best individual life now which, in very modern way, included the best experiences money could buy. And that's the mantra of our current cultural moment too: what matters most is that you *do what you want to do, be what you want to be, yeah*.

But the gospel is not about how to live your best life, now. It's not how to find yourself now, but how to forget yourself, how to die to self, to live not for self but to give yourself away, now. You can pursue your best life plans, and you may win the envy of many now - but watch out that 'now' is all you get: your best life 'now' for the few short years you have on earth. Are you following Jesus? Then the best life is the one you inherit from being in Christ, not the one you rush out to a distant land to build that looks a lot like what everyone else is chasing.

Well, anyway things don't go to plan, so the son had the bright idea of getting a job. "I can fix this," he thought to himself. "I can get my life project back on track!"

*"So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything."* (Luke 15:15-16)

Imagine the Pharisees going "Eew that's disgusting... And serves him right!" The land of his dreams became the land of his nightmares. And for the Pharisees, they would be thinking, "Great! The little brat deserves it!" And remember why he thinks to himself about coming home? *"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!"* (Luke 15:17). His father's hired servants have "food to spare".

He is not even dreaming about coming home as a son, but as a servant. He had 'un-soned' himself and disqualified himself from his father's hospitality. I can hear the Pharisees saying, "That's right! He can work as a servant, nothing more."

But like the woman finding the coin, and the shepherd finding the sheep, this story is about the joy of the father finding a son. He returns home to the waiting arms of a joy filled

father. And then notice the father's response is equally food oriented: "*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.*" So, they began to celebrate" (Luke 15:22-24).

It's time for a party! An extravagant meal flowing from the joy of the father. "Outrageous!" the Pharisees would be thinking. What kind of a father would take that scoundrel back, let alone celebrate his return with a welcoming home party?

Now remember, Jesus is not speaking to 'younger sons' (the prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners). They are pretty happy with Jesus' teaching here and His 'party policy'. It's the Pharisees, the 'older sons', who have raised the issue. They are the ninety-nine sheep, the nine coins, the older son. So now Jesus masterfully turns the story onto His audience: "*Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing*" (Luke 15:25).

He is finding out that his selfish younger brother is on the receiving end of an expensive, celebratory feast! For what? What has he done to deserve it?! How can you possibly celebrate this kid?! If anyone deserves a party, the fatted calf, it's him - is it not? He was at home, working hard, doing exactly what the father told him to do. Hasn't he earned the hospitality of his Father? He says, "*All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!*" (Luke 15:29-30).

The Pharisees would be like parliamentarians at this point, all nodding and "here here'ing" in agreement. They would have totally identified with this elder son, both in his work ethic and his desire to be celebrated. Which brings us to the real point: this story Jesus told around the table was not merely a story of a prodigal, but of two prodigals and a very very good father. Both sons don't know the father and are lost in the far country of their own - one son thinks he can 'un-son' himself by his bad behaviour, and one son thinks he can 'son' himself by his good behaviour. They are both totally lost sons and God *LOVES FINDING LOST THINGS!*

On hearing what had happened we read, "*The older brother became angry and refused to go in...*" (Luke 15:28). The tragedy in the story is that the older son (who by now, I'm sure, the Pharisees know is them) is the miserable one in the end. He refuses to enter the party; his anger has multiplied. He has already cancelled his brother: "*this son of yours*", is another way of saying "he is not my brother". But now he is also angry with the father. Why? Because the father is not preferencing him over his wayward brother. He can see the speck in his brother's eye but not the plank in his own. The younger son had to repent of his sinful heart; the older son had to repent of his self-righteous heart, of thinking he was the

good guy and the other the bad guy. Both are the bad guy and both are still invited to the party! But the party is happening on God's terms and God is the One with the invite list.

So, the elder son doesn't want to be a guest, doesn't want to share in the fathers' joy of the homecoming of a sinner. Three thoughts to conclude:

### **1. It's very easy to be a grumpy self-righteous person.**

If you live playing the comparison game where you need to judge people around you by your criteria (religious or otherwise) - you will live insecure and unhappy because either you look down on some who don't measure up in whatever way, or you long for those people and things that you are trying to measure up to. So, personally, what this looks like is two things:

Firstly, I'm trying to care less about our cultures' vision of the good life. Because the more you care about, the more insecure you become about needing to attain it and compromising something to get it.

Secondly, I know how hard it is to not be judgemental, but I'm working on that one because I know that if I allow myself to get disappointed at every person who doesn't follow the script in my head for their lives - their faith, their giving or serving or time priorities - I'll be perpetually grumpy at most of the people in my life. I'd be a brilliant Pharisee!

### **2. Learn how to be a guest at the party.**

I think reflex application in this series is, "Oh, I will become more welcoming, invite more people into my life," which is not bad, but what if God is asking you to learn how to receive from others, learn from others, to listen to others, to not be the powerful one in the relationship; for being a guest, for receiving. Think about Jesus: did Jesus have a beautiful house to invite people back to? A gourmet kitchen to prep the meal? Apart from a borrowed room and a borrowed lunch, his primary mode was being the guest of others. So, what if the best ministry you will do is when you accept the invitation of someone not like you into their life or their home?

We live in a hyper individualistic, "You gotta love yourself first" culture of today. It's a culture that celebrates memes like, "When you let go of all the toxic people in your life you will find that your life becomes so much easier" (although, I am not talking about putting up with domestic violence or abuse). This is the mantra of our culture: "Cut out all the negative people who don't make you feel good or affirm your life choices and just surround yourself with people who are like yourself" But Jesus did the opposite. He ate with the Pharisees who were super negative about the sinners and Himself; and He ate with the

sinners who were super negative of the religious system. As a Rabbi, He became a guest of the religious cynics and the spiritual and social misfits.

In Community Connect Team on Sunday's we are experiencing a beautiful crossover between church and community. And when I am sitting with a Muslim woman for an hour on Sunday, I am worshipping Jesus. Not because I'm being so selfless giving my time, or because I'm building a bridge to share why she really needs Jesus - I am worshipping because I am taking the very nature of a servant, a listener, and someone who has accepted the offer to be invited into her life, to learn from her and celebrate her story. We are hosting our community but, you know what? The truth is, we also need to learn how to let them host us.

Here is what I've noticed: in the past year, I've had more invitations from economically poor, culturally and linguistically marginalised people in Life Care to come to eat with them than anyone else. Now there is complexity around accepting those invitations and our Community Connect Team is having to work through that - but the heart of the matter is that we should find a will and a way that accepts the invitation to meals because that is exactly what Jesus would do if He were you! If someone not like you, someone lower on the social food chain invites you: take the posture of a guest, say yes sometimes - Jesus would.

### **3. Come to His party.**

*"So his father went out and pleaded with him"* (Luke 15:28). Isn't that beautiful? Jesus is loving the Pharisees here with truth that might actually set them free - pleading with them to come in. He pleads with us all to come in, into the Kingdom Way, into the joy of fellowship with God and one another.

This applies for those of you who feel unworthy; and those of you who really think you are just fine; and those of you who think you are a bit of both. Jesus is pleading with you to enter into the joy of the Kingdom. If you are going through the motions, a little cynical, a little judgemental, a little prone to critiquing those around you, or trying to 'keep up with the Joneses', you just might be the very person Jesus told this story to because you are another one of His prodigal sons or daughters. And, at great cost, Jesus - the crucified One - with stretched out arms, nail pierced hands, runs to you and wraps His arms around you. He says, "Here is the robe, here is the ring, here is the feast!" It doesn't really matter which son you most identify with in this story - in the end what the Father most wants is that you come back to the table: a table of communion with Him and your brothers and sisters.