



**Sermon by: Rev. Robert W. Ater**  
**Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

**March 30, 2025**

### **Joining the Celebration**

Many of us are undoubtedly familiar with the story of the yellow ribbon tied around the tree to welcome a former prisoner home. The story published in *The New York Post* and then *Readers Digest* in the early 1970's inspired the popular song of that era, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the old Oak Tree."<sup>1</sup> If you're not familiar, this is one of those true stories of American folklore passed down in oral tradition before finally being written down. It has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century legend that women would wear a yellow ribbon in their hair as a sign of support and solidarity with a loved one away at war. One of the forms the story took by the 1970's, is that of a young man, who writes from prison to his parents to say he will soon be released and would like to come home. So as not to put too much pressure on his folks and to perhaps let them all save some face, if needed, he instructs them to tie a yellow ribbon around the tree in the front yard, if it's ok for him to come home. When he rides by on the bus, he says, if there's no yellow ribbon, he'll keep moving on ... if there is a yellow ribbon, though, he'll stop the bus and come home. Well as the story goes, when the bus rounded the corner, there was not only one yellow ribbon but dozens tied around the tree trunk and in the branches to welcome him home!

Some have considered this story from our stories of American folklore as a modern re-telling of the Biblical story we heard today, often called the parable of the prodigal son, the story of a son who is wastefully or carelessly extravagant. This text is the third parable in a series, following the lost sheep and the lost coin, that Jesus uses to respond to the pharisees as they challenge him about eating with sinners, outcasts, and tax collectors. The traditional interpretation of the text points to the comforting and encouraging themes of God's grace and love, that always seeks out the lost, those on the margins, that others, like the pharisees, might have pushed to the side. This popular and compelling interpretation also encourages the listeners to identify with the prodigal son, perhaps in our own struggles with sin and the brokenness of the world, so that we might see how the same love that the father showed the prodigal son (or the lost sheep or coin) is also offered to each one of us and to all of us, how we might experience anew that yellow ribbon being tied around the old oak tree of our lives. This interpretation holds true, too, with the text's placement here in the lectionary in the middle of Lent, as a text about repentance, as an invitation to turn our lives once again toward God, and the hope and promise of being forgiven anew.

And while there is much to be said for this traditional interpretation, I was also challenged in my study this week to consider the context of the story more broadly, for there is a lot more here to consider. It's a long and full story with several characters: the father, the two sons: the older, responsible one, and the younger, for sake of comparison, irresponsible one,

the hired hands, the servants, and all who come to the celebration at the end. I wonder, if we were each able to step back from the text, from the story that we know and have been told, with whom might we then, identify? If we were given the chance to name this text for a future translation of the Bible, what would we call it? ... Think for a moment ... with whom do you identify in this story? What, or who, jumps out at you? ... Perhaps as a parent, you can relate to how the father loves both of his sons unconditionally, how sometimes one child might need a little more attention or support or guidance than the other, but that you love them both the same. You might call this the "Parable of the waiting father" or "the generous or loving parent." Or perhaps you can identify with the older son, who is shocked and angered, incredulous at best, at what has happened, feeling overlooked and even underappreciated. You might call this parable, like my seminary professor Don Juel did, "The Lament of the Responsible Child." Or perhaps you can identify with the younger son, trying to find his way, to fit into the cultural norms and rules of the world around you that don't *always* seem to fit you. I wonder, too, what those hired hands or servants might have felt like watching the squabbles of the privileged happening right in front of them. Or perhaps you might wonder what it would be like to be invited to that party at the end! One commentator that I read this week reflected on how various experiences and social locations might change where the reader places the problem of the text -- however one might define that.<sup>2</sup> Some might blame the father who carelessly gave the younger son so much money, or others might find fault with the foolishness of the younger son who squandered it -- the traditional interpretation, or perhaps others with a different sort of cultural norm might blame those in society who didn't help the younger brother when he fell on bad times.

My first experience of being asked to think really critically about this text, perhaps any text for that matter, was in my first year of seminary, in a New Testament survey course being taught by Dr. Donald Juel, whom I just mentioned. He was a "Minnesota nice" sort of guy with the accent to match, who surprised us when he blew the doors off our classroom one morning when he took up the cause of the older brother and his lament, he's the one who I just said, would rename this text, "The Lament of the Responsible Child."<sup>3</sup> He argued that he thought the older son was right all along, that he had good reason to be angry, that in the patriarchal culture of the time that directed that the oldest son would inherit all the father's property, that the "prodigal son" then had been given his *older brother's* robe, *his brother's* ring, and *his* fatted calf.<sup>4</sup> So Dr. Juel challenged a room full of first year seminarians, there were more than 200 of us in that lecture hall, to reconsider what we'd always been taught, to really dig into the text, and to listen to how the story of the text speaks in conversation with the stories of our lives, whoever we are and wherever life might take us. For me, I learned that there was a lot more to the story than what first meets the eye.

With whomever we can most identify in this Biblical story, the good news of the Gospel is that, when we read on in the story, as Dr. Juel would say to us, when we continue the journey through this Lenten season, through the dark days of the crucifixion and into the hope of the Easter resurrection, is that God *DOES* run out to meet us, all of us, not just the younger, prodigal son, but his older brother, too, and the hired hands and the servants. The

good news of the Gospel is that God ties up countless yellow ribbons for each one of us and for all of us, and that we're invited to join the celebration!

The second letter to the Corinthians that was our epistle reading for today points to the hope of this promise, too, that in Christ we are called to be a new creation, giving us the gift of reconciliation, and entrusting us, each one of us, with its message. As I read those words from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, that I've heard many times before, in the context of today's story from Luke about reconciliation and the very broken world that we find ourselves living in today, these words feel all the more important to me as we think about our call to be the Church in a new day, *in this day*, entrusted with the message of reconciliation ourselves. I'm grateful that we're aspiring at Immanuel Church to be a place, in this rapidly changing world, which doesn't shy away from that responsibility, but, I hope and pray, leans into it, challenging and inviting one another to reconcile ourselves one to another, and to be peacemakers. We'll hear more about that from the Rev. Dr. Laurie Lyter Bright who will be with us on Wednesday night to share more about the story of Presbyterians committed to non-violence in the work of peacemaking. And today, after worship, Dr. Bush will lead a second conversation in our series on grounding ourselves in our theological affirmations of faith during this unsettling time in our world. He'll help us to explore the Belhar Confession, written by the Dutch Reformed Church, a sibling denomination of our own Presbyterian Church (USA) in response to apartheid in South Africa. The Belhar Confession names the white Dutch Reformed Church's complicity in racism and apartheid over generations in South Africa. It's perhaps an important contemporary story for us to consider today alongside the well-known story of the prodigal and his brother and of all of us, of God's radical inclusion, love and forgiveness. In the accompanying letter offered by the Church alongside the Confession, this affirmation is offered:

"Our prayer is that this act of confession ... will be reconciling and uniting. We know that such an act of confession and process of reconciliation will necessarily involve much pain and sadness. It demands the pain of repentance, remorse, and confession; the pain of individual and collective renewal and a changed way of life."<sup>5</sup>

A changed way of life is, after all, the ultimate hope of the Gospel, that we might understand God's forgiveness for us, God's reconciliation with us in the grace and love of Jesus Christ, and then follow God's example by living in a new and reconciled way in how we treat one another. These texts and the story of Belhar, challenge us to think even more inclusively about who's in and who's out, to challenge the pharisees of our day, to think even more outside the box about how we love and welcome one another. I'm still pondering the interpretation of the text that I mentioned earlier that wondered why those in society weren't helping the prodigal son when he was in distress.

At the end of today's text, the father proclaims to his son, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." We had to celebrate and rejoice.

Friends, we're all invited by God to join the celebration, because God has run out to welcome us all, has tied those yellow ribbons and invites us to do the same for one another.

At Immanuel Church, as we continue through this season of transition, of asking questions and expanding our ways of being in community with one another, the Session, Immanuel's board of congregational leaders and the ministers, has been talking about how we welcome and invite connections in our community of faith here. We've been curious about whether we might move beyond the traditional member, non-member, and visitor categories we often use. We're aware that on any given Sunday there are many people in the pews and in our virtual balcony with many different stories and many who may not be official Immanuel members, for any number of reasons but who are also certainly not "visitors," either. So, at its meeting this month, the Session adopted a new category of connection that we're calling "friends of Immanuel Church." This may not sound like a big deal, as we all have lots of friends in this place, but our hope is that by naming this new category of connection, we'll build a culture here together that is even more inclusive and welcoming, with fewer barriers and deeper connections. Perhaps those in our midst who are retired clergy and their spouses, will feel a bit more welcomed and included, regular worshipers who value being here but also have a familial connection to another faith community, too, spouses of members, adult children of members, and even those who are considering membership and might see this new "friend" category as a step in the process of learning, exploring, and deepening faith and connection.

This is a new creation for all of us, and we're looking forward to leaning into it more fully in the weeks and months ahead. If you're not an official member, and consider yourself a friend of the Church, please be in touch! We have a new Welcome and Orientation Event coming up after Easter for those considering membership and those who might like to officially be welcomed as a friend.

In that newer Common English Bible translation that we heard today, did you wonder how this chapter of Luke was titled? Simply this: *Occasions for celebration!*

Friends, we are all invited. "Come and join the celebration; come and join this happy feast; Jesus makes an invitation to the greatest and the least."<sup>6</sup>  
AMEN!

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tie\\_a\\_Yellow\\_Ribbon\\_Round\\_the\\_Ole\\_Oak\\_Tree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tie_a_Yellow_Ribbon_Round_the_Ole_Oak_Tree)

<sup>2</sup> Woznicki, Chris, *That's Not in the Text*, <https://cwoznicki.com/2013/03/17/thats-not-in-the-text/>

<sup>3</sup> Micheli, Jason, *The Twist at the Tail*, <https://jasonmicheli.substack.com/p/the-twist-at-the-tail>

<sup>4</sup> Juel, Donald H., *Performing the Scriptures*, Lecture 3, recorded at Princeton Theological Seminary, 1997, <https://commons.ptsem.edu/id/06313>

<sup>5</sup> The Confession of Belhar, Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA), p. 306, <https://pcusa.org/sites/default/files/boc2016.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> There is Now a New Creation, *Glory to God – The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #774.