



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

August 18, 2019

**Party Time!**  
Rev. Jason Freyer

# **Party Time!**

Rev. Jason Freyer

© 2019 by Rev. Jason Freyer and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: August 23, 2019

*Psalm 145*

*Luke 15*

Some of you know my path to becoming a pastor in the Presbyterian Church wasn't exactly normal. I started my studies at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 2006. I began really slowly, only taking one or two classes at a time. I took a little break while I was transitioning from a former job to work here at Westminster, but then started up again sometime around 2009. Working full time in ministry and going to seminary is no laughing matter. Working full time, going to seminary, and having twin newborns is just painful. I even had a professor once who let me turn in an assignment late by saying "I don't know how you do it. Sleep deprivation is a war crime according to the Geneva convention."

Sometime around 2014, my darling wife said "You know when you graduate; we're going to have the party to end all parties." This turned in to something that I looked forward to for something like two or three years. Whenever a big test was coming up: think of the party. Whenever a paper was getting the better of me: think of the party. Whenever I was tired beyond recognition: think of the party. The party itself finally arrived after graduation in 2016, and it was exactly how I would have wanted to celebrate this accomplishment. We held it at a little pavilion in South Park with a cookout. There were people from just about every stage of my life there. There were high school friends, college friends, seminary friends, Westminster friends, and family from all around. There was no agenda, no plan, and no mandatory fun. There was just a ton of food, drinks, and conversation with my friends.

Today I want to look at a story about parties. It's a familiar story of Jesus', so much so that I had to look back over the

schedule as I was sure we had preached on it quite recently. Today, I want to take a look at the parable of the prodigal son. A friend of mine pointed out something that totally changed my view of this story, and I thought it was worth sharing. But it is indeed critical that when we study familiar stories and passages that we do our best to not auto-fill in the meanings we have assumed the story holds. Let's try to come at this from a new perspective.

Also today I'm going to be reading from the Common English Bible, which is a translation that I have come to love lately.

We start with the beginning, which sets the context of the story:

*All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

That's one of those lines that is pretty easy to read right past, or just skip altogether when you're looking at the story of the prodigal son. But it's so very critical to what's going on here. Jesus is caught hanging out with a rough crowd. He's hanging out with sinners. The Pharisees were a group of rule-followers, so these sinners would have been an offense to them. Also, the Pharisees would have stood to benefit from the sacrifices that these sinners were supposed to have made in the temple, and so they probably felt as though these sinners owed them something.

Jesus hears their grumbings and tells them three stories back to back to back. I think it's important to take a look at each in turn:

<sup>3</sup> Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> “Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn’t he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. <sup>6</sup> When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost sheep.’ <sup>7</sup> In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

[\*Common English Bible\*](#). (2011). (Lk 15:3–7). Nashville, TN: Common English Bible.

This is another little story that we have heard so much that it is tempting to breeze right past it. I had always imagined that while the shepherd went off and looked for the one lost sheep that the other 99 would just kind of huddle in place. I’ve since been told that this is not exactly how sheep work! If one could have run away under the watchful eye of the shepherd, the other 99 could just as easily have run for the hills while he was gone. The guy in Jesus’ story is an abjectly bad shepherd. It’s incredibly possible that owing to this shepherd’s actions to run away and find the lost sheep, he could very easily have lost the other 99.

And his reaction is incredible! This shepherd wants to have a party. This shepherd wants to throw a party with everyone he knows, friends and neighbors, to celebrate this remarkably poor decision he has made.

Let’s try to modernize this parable a little. Suppose a friend of yours is heavily invested in the stock market. He has 100 shares of Apple computers that he purchased back in the 90s, so they’re worth quite a bit of money. But, he tells you

that he has decided he's going to trade in 99 of those shares of Apple, and invest them in personal beepers, because they're totally coming back in style! He wants to celebrate by renting out a fire hall and throwing a feast. Would you go?

We might think such a person has lost a step, right? That would have been exactly what the Pharisees were thinking as Jesus wraps up this first story. Who in their right mind would throw this party?

Then Jesus turns to his second story:

<sup>8</sup> *“Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won't light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me because I've found my lost coin.’ <sup>10</sup> In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.”*

*Common English Bible*. (2011). (Lk 15:8–10). Nashville, TN: Common English Bible.

This one we don't even need to modernize, do we? Suppose there is a woman who lost a nickel. She looks and looks and looks, but she just can't find that lucky nickel. And then, oh happy days, she finds the nickel in the couch cushion! So she decides to rent the fire hall down the street, put out a really nice buffet, hire a DJ, and celebrate with all of her friends and family. If we knew this woman, we might start to question her sanity. It's just a truly horrible, poor choice of what to do with your money. And if you were a Pharisee sitting around listening to Jesus tell this story, that's exactly what you'd be thinking too. Who in their right mind would throw this kind of party?

And then Jesus turns to the prodigal son:

<sup>11</sup> Jesus said, “A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. <sup>13</sup> Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

<sup>14</sup> “When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! <sup>23</sup> Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting <sup>24</sup> because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

[\*Common English Bible\*](#). (2011). (Lk 15:11–24). Nashville, TN: Common English Bible.

One of the questions that first comes up with a story like this is “who are you in this story?” To be sure, different cultures



put different emphasis on different places in this story. But by and large if you are an American Christian, I think just about everyone thinks of themselves as the prodigal son. Clearly that son is the hero of the story, right? We all know this story. We're all sinners, and we all fall short of the glory of God. We've all had that moment when we come crawling back to God asking for forgiveness. Hopefully we've all experienced that moment when we find the love of God, the radical forgiveness that comes from God's exceptional love. Surely that's the feel good point of this story.

Right?

If this is where this story ended, it would be just like the other two. In fact, the prodigal son would not be the hero of this story. He would be like the one sheep that wandered off, or the nickel in the couch cushions. This story, up to this point, does what the first two do. What father in his right mind throws a party for a son who has stolen and wasted half of the family fortune? He spent all that, and you're going to spend more money on him? Who would endorse such behavior?

The Pharisee's must have felt pretty good about themselves at this point.

But then Jesus finishes the story:

*<sup>25</sup> "Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> The servant replied, 'Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> Then the older son was furious and didn't want to enter in, but his*

*father came out and begged him. <sup>29</sup> He answered his father, 'Look, I've served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you've never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' <sup>31</sup> Then his father said, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.'* ”

[Common English Bible](#). (2011). (Lk 15:25–32). Nashville, TN: Common English Bible.

When you see “older son,” think about the Pharisees that started this chapter. Think about the religious elite. Think about those who feel like the world owes them something. Think about those who are sure and certain that they know who’s in and who’s out? These kinds of people have issues. They have issues with liberal spending when it comes to grace, forgiveness, and celebration. They have issues with parties that are thrown for people who are “undeserving.” They might even see the party, hear the band, smell the food, but feel so righteous in themselves that they won’t walk thirty yards and go to the party that they’ve been invited to.

I’m sure none of us would want to admit it, but what if we’re the older brother? What if we have an idea of who’s in and who’s out? What if we have strict lines around which we feel like belongs, and who doesn’t? What if we know the kinds of people we would welcome, and the kinds of people we would roll our eyes about if they walked in to our sanctuary?

And a quick word of warning here. Perhaps you find yourself this morning thinking “Well, I’m super affirming! I’m inclusive and welcoming of everyone! It’s those other people, the ones

who are judgmental and exclusionary, and those ones over there...” It’s actually pretty easy to go the full way around this circle and be rather judgmental about how not judgmental we are.

This is one of those stories where I think it’s remarkably important to listen to what Jesus has the father figure saying. I think we can learn a lot about the character of God here.

For starters, God is all about parties. It appears to me that God is all about celebrations, even when it doesn’t make any logical sense to celebrate. When things are going well, God wants to celebrate. When things are going poorly, God wants to celebrate. When a majority of the world turns their back on God, but a simple few remain faithful to the ways of grace and love, God wants to celebrate.

When a congregation finds itself still trying to recover from a collective trauma, when one person has deeply betrayed them, when a congregation is having a hard time putting the pieces back together, when a congregation is facing a different future than they had imagined for themselves...I mean I’m talking about someone else here. But I believe God wants to celebrate the incredible good that comes from such a congregation. God wants to celebrate the signs of grace and life and love and forgiveness that show up in the halls and outside the walls of a congregation like that, no matter how hurt they may feel in the moment.

The simple fact remains; yes, there is a lot to mourn in our world. There is a lot of room for concern, there is a lot of room for discipline, and there is a lot of room for outrage. But it would appear to me that Jesus is introducing us to a God in this story that says “There is *always* room to celebrate!”

The second thing we can learn about God is that God *pleads* with us to join the party. I love the language here. The father figure runs out in to the field where the older brother is and *begs* him to join the party. Have you ever heard someone beg? It's not a simple request. It's not easy to ignore. It's not quiet or meek or gentle. It can be some of the most gut wrenching displays of human emotion. *Please* come to this party...I'm begging you!

I don't think a whole lot of people have that image in their minds for God. I don't think a lot of people understand just how much relationship means to this God. Whether you are on the outside of the party because you've made some bad choices in your life, or whether you are on the outside of the party because you can't stand those on the inside, God shows up pleading with us.

Please come in. Please.

But then we listen to what Jesus has the Father say. At this point in the story, Jesus could have put any words in to the mouth of God. God could have scolded the older brother for not being forgiving. God could have sung the praises of the younger brother's decision for coming back. God could have just case the older brother aside, let him live with the consequences of his choices.

But those aren't what Jesus chooses.

Wherever you are in life, whether you are the prodigal on your way back home, the righteous sibling standing in the field, or one of the hired hands just eager to please, I want you to hear this right now. So rarely do we get to hear a quote straight from God, so listen to what Jesus thinks God wants you to hear right now:

*You are always with me.*

No matter what choices you have made, no matter who you choose to love, no matter who you've been fooled into hating, no matter how long it's been since you think you've heard the father's voice, no matter how far away God feels, you are always with me.

*And everything I have is yours.*

Love is yours. Grace is yours. Forgiveness for yourself is yours. The ability to widen your circle and give forgiveness to others is yours. The ability to tear down the walls of separation and hostility is yours. The courage to overcome your fears for the future is yours. This created world and all the beauty it has to offer is yours. Everything is yours.

You, my friends, are invited to the party. Maybe at this stage in life the party seems ridiculous. Maybe it doesn't make any sense. That's ok, that's just how God rolls. And those people who you assume are on the outside, they are invited to the party. There is more than enough room for everyone. There's enough food and drink. There are enough festivities. Everyone is welcome. Because parties are a part of God's nature. This God isn't interested in stuffy religion. This God wants to celebrate. This God wants to invite. This God *pleads* with us to come in to the party.

And when you're on the inside, when you've found your way to the party, God has something to say just to you:

*You are always with me. And everything I have is yours.*



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630

[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)