

## Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

## *The Elder Brother Joins the Party*

## Gospel Lesson

Luke 15:11-32 (NRSV)

<sup>11</sup>Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" <sup>20</sup>So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup>"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>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.'"

## Bible/Sermon Focus

We are in our first week of a three week series called "Welcome Home." When we think about stories of coming home, or being part of a home, the Bible story for this week is likely to come to mind. The story of the Prodigal Son is one of the longest parables that Jesus tells. Much of the story's content focuses on the younger brother, but the story ends abruptly, in the middle of an exchange between the father and the elder brother.

In this way, Jesus drives home the point of the parable. The elder brother remains outside of the party, refusing to come in, because he has followed all of the rules and has always been good. He cannot seem to celebrate the return of his brother, too caught up in his resentment.

Instead of being able to celebrate that a lost child has been brought back into the fold, the rule follower remains steadfast in their unchanged heart. Jesus here is talking specifically about the Pharisees, to whom the parable is addressed. But, we can all resonate.

So, if we were to bring this parable into our community here at Manchester UMC, who would we be? Clearly the answer is a little bit of both of the brothers, but there are some good arguments for Manchester UMC being a church of, *historically*, "elder brothers." I spent a few years working at a church in Chicago filled with people in addiction therapy, folks who were unhoused, and criminals. It was a church primarily filled with people who were not rule followers, people who could easily be considered (and considered themselves to be) "younger brothers."

Manchester UMC is primarily a traditional congregation. It is a part of who we are. And yet, you can make the case that those of us who are rule followers, "elder brother" types, are actually the kind that go ahead and join the party! The kind of siblings in Christ who celebrate the return of the prodigal. The kind who, like the father, run in excitement to greet those who have been lost, and who feel unworthy of love and grace and forgiveness. This is no small feat and it's pretty amazing when you meet these types of people.

As someone who has run with *colorful* people most of her life, I occasionally would meet this kind of person, the welcoming "elder brother." It's the friend who comes outside to keep you company while you smoke a cigarette even though they don't smoke. They don't critique; they just love you and keep you company. It's the friend who buys your kid shoes they desperately need, when they know you're broke, just as a random gift in passing, without critiquing the way you handle your finances. It's grace, and not a lording over of it. A "we are equal because we are siblings" kind of grace. It the "we are in this together" kind of grace.

And that, beloveds, is what the kingdom of God looks like. We show up for each other. This week we sang a song by Bishop Briggs titled "Hold On." As we move through this sermon series we are going to be considering what it means to be members of the same church, not just Christ's church but Manchester UMC. I pray you hold this song in your hearts over these next few weeks.

*We've seen the holy, the lonely, the sinners and  
Been to the promise, the garden, the wasteland  
Oh*

*The truth of it all  
We rise and we fall  
We hold on, we hold on*

*When we fight, when we lie  
When the weakness shows  
When we laugh, when we cry  
When it's all exposed*

*The truth of it all  
We rise and we fall*

*We hold on, we hold on  
Oh, love, we hold on together*

*We scream like sisters and brothers  
Drew hard lines  
We love like star crossed, blind eyes  
Seeing light*

*Oh, the truth of it all  
We rise and we fall  
We hold on, we hold on  
Oh, love, we hold on together*

*When we fight, when we lie  
When the weakness shows  
When we laugh, when we cry  
When it's all exposed*

*The truth of it all  
We rise and we fall  
We hold on, we hold on  
We holdin' on, we hold on  
Oh, love, we hold on together*

## Discussion Questions

1. How are you like the older brother?
2. How are you like the younger brother?
3. Reflect on this quote from Rev. Dr. Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, "Lost is a reference either to people who have never experienced a relationship with God or to persons who have turned away from this relationship... God does not focus on why or how the person becomes 'lost.' God rejoices and celebrates the individual's homecoming."
4. Reflect on the lyrics from Bishop Briggs? What do you resonate most with?

## Prayer

Gentle Creator, thank you for the church family you have given us. Teach us what your vision for our community look like. Guide us in making that vision a reality. Thank you for all of our siblings, here in our church. **Amen.**

*"Oh, love, we hold on together" -Bishop Briggs*