



## Mission: Embracing

Luke 15:11-32

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The other day I walked into the gathering area and saw little Sage, you know Sage? The cute little red-headed son of Rachel and Murray. Well there was Sage sitting at that little round table with a box of little multi-coloured building sticks, and the box was turned upside down, sticks all over the place and he was going through them and distributing them far and wide. But he wasn't doing it frantically, just systematically, and diligently, thoroughly. It was hilarious, and I thought, there's a little man with a mission, with a purpose, not the mission and purpose his mom really wanted to clean up after, but he was so purposeful in his broadcasting of these little sticks.

Last week we talked about mission, our mission of embracing our community with the love of Christ, but also the idea of having a mission, given to us by God, something that we are here for. Our mission, or our holy purpose is that thing that we can't not do, the thing that compels our life, that lives in the place where our deepest yearnings and the deepest needs of the world come together.

Well here at Northwood our mission is embracing our community with the love of Christ, and for the next few weeks I want to linger over those words, beginning this week with the first, the verb of the sentence, the action of our mission, "Embracing." I looked around at different statements of mission of churches and organizations and the verbs, the words of action are fascinating and say a lot about the nature of the community and the desires of the community. Eagle Ridge United Church, an active and growing United Church congregation in Coquitlam has at the core of its mission, "... to raise up disciples of Jesus Christ." So they are about raising up, growing, nurturing, and when you look at what they do, it is all about helping people grow in their faith. Crossroads, our sister church in the presbytery over on Scott Road wants to be a Spiritual Oasis and so the verbs of their mission are "inviting and welcoming." That is a different kind of posture to the world and will create different kinds of activities, perhaps a gentle outward looking life. I looked beyond United Church walls to the huge, more evangelical mega-church Willow Creek in the States. The verb of their mission is "to turn." "To turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers" and if you look at their activities, they are all shaped around turning from an old life and towards a new one. And here, the verb is "embrace."

That's a risky verb to have as the active ingredient in mission, because embraces can be so easily misunderstood, and there are so many different kinds of embraces that mean different things. The embrace of a crying child speaks of comforting, the embrace of Sami Salo after his game winning overtime goal yesterday was all about jocular celebration. The loving embrace we witnessed on Friday night as Scott Swanson and Jen Purych exchanged their wedding vows

spoke of intimacy and vulnerability. And what are the other ways in which our life is an embrace?

The embrace that caught my eye in our scripture reading today was the embrace of the father of the prodigal son at the moment of his return- a beautiful moment, a hearty and emotional embrace. But how very many ways was that father called to embrace his son over the years and how many different postures of embrace did he have to find to faithfully embrace his son. Think about it. When this son of his came to him and said, "I don't want to wait until you die but I want you to give me my inheritance now," I wonder what the embrace looked like then. How do you love a son like that? You can't hold on to him because that will just make him pull away even more. So he gives him his half, and lets him go, but in that letting go there is a deeper embrace of the boy, a delicate holding and hoping that he will come to his senses. I think likely the embrace has a wondering, "What could I have done differently," and "Is this really the right thing to do?" This is the toughest kind of embrace, the one that comes with a farewell.

And then there is the embrace offered in the quiet waiting and wondering and worrying about where he went and whether he is still alive and whatever became of him. He never let go of the thread of hope but embraced it in ways likely he only knew. He stored it up in his heart, and when he saw that young man off in the distance and knew somehow that the figure on the road was the returning son, those years of quiet embracing poured out in a different posture, a running, down the road, robes flying in all direction to scoop up this rascal and wrap his arms around him. Then the embrace of the party, the embrace that is expressed in gathering friends, and family, killing the fatted calf, pulling out all stops in celebration.

But we mustn't forget, there is another posture of embrace here, one that looks around and realizes the pain of the one who, at this moment is standing in the shadows, the elder son. Somehow, he too needs to feel the embrace, and it is hard to embrace someone who holds such deep and prickly resentment. Sometimes that embrace feels like hugging a tree trunk covered in bark. How do you embrace one without alienating the other? How do you strike these two postures at the same time? And finally, the answer comes as the father leaves to return to the party, carefully being sure to leave the door open to the older brother. There is an embrace in that careful, subtle act of leaving the door ajar that speaks of understanding and hope.

Isn't it amazing how many different forms our love takes in life? Think about your own family, your friendships. How many different postures do you take in order to embrace the people you love? And how often do you, consciously or unconsciously choose one or another in an attempt to rightly match your desire for love to be expressed with the situation, the kind of relationship that is there, and the need of the other. It is no small, uncomplicated thing that we have chosen to place as the active ingredient of our mission, embracing. We need to be thoughtful and insightful, and nimble and flexible, and sensitive, sometimes eager, sometimes patient. On Friday night at Scott and Jen's wedding the embrace was loud and boisterous. When the prayer shawl is wrapped around the shoulders of one in hospital it is a quiet and tender embrace. Later on today when we are visited by people of different faiths from around the lower mainland it will be an open, interested, smiling, welcoming embrace. Isn't it a good thing that we are a community of many kinds of people, because only in community can we together be so many different things, strike so many different postures, and still be united in one mission.

Well we can do this, because behind and beneath every single different act of embracing that is offered here is the belief that when humans are embraced they flourish, that all of us yearn to be embraced in some way, that our soul longs for embrace, and that God made us for embracing. Behind and beneath every act of embracing there is a spirit which guides us, sustains us, makes what we offer a holy thing. This one word, active word speaks of welcome and hospitality, of trust and hope, of compassion and healing. It is the verb that animates our life. It is the word through which God blows the breath of life into all that we do. Amen