

ears to hear your word, eyes to see your face, and courage to follow the path you set before us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

As we were concluding our meal I invited all of you to reflect on the question on the sheet: “What does home mean to you?”
As you continue to reflect on that question I would like to invite you now to reflect on the four questions that are listed below it on the sheet.

Where did you live between the ages of 7 – 12 years?

How did you heat your home during those years?

What room was the center of “human warmth” in your home, or who was the center of warmth in your life during those years?

When God become a “warm” being to you and how did this happen?

If these questions seem familiar to you it is possible that you saw them when you studied the book, *The Edge of Adventure* by Keith Miller, Bruce and Hazel Larson. Or possibly Bruce Larson himself may have used them with you when he visited this church, if my reading of our history is correct, on April 20-23, 1980.

These questions are often called the Quaker Questions. I had known them over the years and I found them again when I did a Goggle search under that title, but I did not find any reason being given why they are given that title. If you know the answer you can share it with me later.

Today as we look at these four Quaker questions I would like to ask all of you to answer just the first question by giving your name and your answer to the question,

Where did you live between the ages of 7 – 12 years?

As we look at the other questions

How did you heat your home during those years?

What room was the center of “human warmth” in your home, or who was the center of warmth in your life during those years?

When God become a “warm” being to you and how did this happen?)

It is clear that whoever wrote them was inviting us to look deeper into what home means to us ultimately not just as we think about our earthly home but what it means for us to feel “at home” with God. Last Sunday in this congregation as we sang Isaac Watts’ paraphrase of Psalm 23 we remembered that he suggested that the relationship God desires with us is that we might not feel like strangers, or guests but like a child at home. (My Shepherd Shall Supply My Need, No. 172 *The Presbyterian Hymnal*) We may suggest then that the question could be phrased not just as what does home mean to us, but what should home mean to us when we claim our true identity as the beloved children of God?

Last Sunday this congregation, along with many others that use the Revised Common Lectionary, was invited to think about that question in relationship to a familiar parable that Jesus told. Before thinking about that parable again I would like to invite us to look again at the context in which

Jesus spoke this parable. We will do this as we read the words from Luke 15:1-2 on the sheet:

Leader:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying,

People:

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The words remind us that there is probably no place where we feel more at home than when we sit down to a meal together. It is not just the food but the conversation that takes place around that meal that becomes so significant for family life. Indeed many people have argued that one of the reasons for the breakdown of so much family life today is that everyone is so busy that they do not sit down and share meals together. Ask your children or your grandchildren when they last sat down with their whole immediate family and shared a meal together. One of the complaints of the Pharisees and scribes against Jesus was that he was feeling comfortable enough to be at home and to share a meal with people they regarded as people to be despised. Jesus was eating with people with whom he should have no association because they were tax-collectors and sinners who were not being faithfully obedient to all of God's law to make them worthy enough in their eyes of being at home with them and most of all of being at home with God.

It is in this context that Jesus shares first of all the parable of the lost sheep and then the parable of the lost coin. Then as the third parable in this same chapter he shares the most familiar one about which many of us thought last Sunday. For those of you who are not familiar with this parable

I have printed the words out on the sheet as they are found in Luke 15:3,11b-32. I would invite you if you need to do so to follow these words, or to simply recall what you know of this parable as I read something of a paraphrase of this parable as Michael Lindvall shares it in his Lenten study, *Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem*. He does not acknowledge where he found the story so it may well be a version he wrote himself. As you hear it, think about what it means to you to feel at home with God as a beloved child.

“There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me.” (In asking for his inheritance before the proper time, this son was as good as wishing his father dead.) But the father divided his living between them anyway. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in shameful loose living (probably including prostitutes). And when he had spent every last penny, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. He would have gladly fed on the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he had no options left, he “came to himself” and thought, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough to spare, but I perish here with hunger!” In his accustomed self-absorbed manner, he said to himself, “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am not worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.’” He thought to himself, “It can’t be worse than this. It is worth the risk, and if I know my father . . .”

While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him through the window of the house. But he remained seated at his writing table until his son was brought into him. Remaining seated, he greeted his son with grim countenance, crossing his arms before his breast. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And the father said to his servants, "Quickly take him into the fields, and there he shall toil side by side with his faithful brother for at least forty days until he proves himself worthy to be a son of mine."

And after forty days, the elder brother came and drew near to the house, and his father ran and embraced him and kissed him. The elder brother said to his father, "This younger son of yours has grown somewhat in spirit during these forty days of hard labor in the fields." And his father said to his older son, "Son, if you think your younger brother is truly repentant, I would desire to put the best robes on you both, and shoes on your feet, and rings on your hands. My son, let us bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us all make merry, for you have been so faithful, and your younger brother who was dead is alive and who was lost is found." And the older son said, "Let me ponder the matter of such a banquet, father. Perhaps after another forty days it would be fitting to kill the fatted calf for us."

As I stated earlier I do not know who wrote that version of the story. But I would like to ask you how you would feel about being at home with God, and what it means to be a beloved child of God if Jesus had told the story in this way? Another way of thinking about the story is also to reflect on how it would have turned out if when the younger son got back home he

found his father was dead and his elder brother was running the home? What sort of welcome would he have received then? How much at home would he have felt?

The original story that Jesus told and the paraphrase that we heard remind all of us that what it means for us to be at home with God, and to be the beloved children of God ultimately is determined not by us but by God and how God has chosen to reveal God's self to us. The Pharisees and scribes grumbled and complained against Jesus and his words and deeds because the picture of God that he was presenting was not one with which they felt comfortable or at home.

What about us, how comfortable and at home do we feel with the picture of God that not this paraphrase but the one that Jesus presented in the parable?

Who after all would not want to accept the invitation that the father gives to come and to celebrate, and to join the party? Who would not want to come home to such a gracious God?

As you think about those questions I would invite you to read with me the words of Flannery O'Connor printed on the sheet who when speaking of grace says,

All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.

From *The Habit of Being* by Flannery O'Connor, 1979, Vintage Books, New York, page 307

How much would the elder brother have been changed if he had accepted the gracious invitation to come inside and to join the party for his younger brother who had returned home? How much would the Pharisees

have been changed if they had accepted the gracious invitation of Jesus to sit down and to eat with tax-collectors and sinners?

As we think about what it means to be at home with God and to be a beloved child how much is grace changing us as we look around and see whom God has invited to share that home with us? Lent is a time for us to pause again and to look at our lives and to ask how often are we still resisting the changes of thought, of attitude, of words, and or actions that grace is seeking to bring to our lives that we might more fully come to know our true identity as the beloved children of God, who know what it is to be at home with God. Our closing hymn will prompt us again to think how wonderful are those words of life to us?

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Question, Reflections and Reading for next Tuesday, March 23:

What Is Precious in God's Sight and in Our Sight?
-- Reflections on how we express our love for Jesus
Reading from John 12:1-8

Closing Prayer

Loving God, your mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. We cannot fathom this love that comes to meet us before we are able to come home. We can never reach its limit. Help us to come home from all the places where we have wandered from you, and help us joyfully to be able to greet others who have also come home to the newness of life you offer, for we ask these things in your name and for your sake. Amen.

Closing Hymn page 45 "Wonderful Words of Life" stanzas 1 and 3