

## **“Don’t Miss the Grand Opening”**

Luke 15:11-32

*Series: Finding Your Way Back to God Week 5. Awakening to Life*

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It looked like a political rally. A crowd formed. Reporters covered the story. Elected officials greeted the public. Business leaders made time in their busy schedules to be there. Despite being just days away from the Pennsylvania Primary, this was not about the vote. It was the Grand Opening for the new Habitat for Humanity ReStore in Langhorne near Chuck E Cheese. A ReStore receives donations of used items and building supplies and sells them at a discount. The funds help build Habitat houses in our area. Since Habitat is a Christian organization, they invited me to give the prayer of dedication before they cut the ribbon. One of our three Bucks County Commissioners Diane Marseglia gave a brief speech. She praised the work of Habitat and said she is glad there is a ReStore near her home. In fact, she needed a construction tool. “I was wondering...Can I buy a level? Do you have a level here?” Then they introduced me. Before I gave the prayer, I thanked Diane for attending and added, “In this election season it’s so great to hear about an elected official who wants to be on the level.”

At this Grand Opening there was a long line of people waiting to get in. The first guys in line waited two hours. “Why?” I asked. “Well we are carpenters who buy, rehab and sell homes. We saw some kitchen cabinets in there and we don’t want anyone else to get them.” “You guys are carpenters?” I asked. “Wow that’s amazing. So is my boss.” “Really,” the boss chuckled. “I know you’re a minister. You don’t have to waste any time on me. I’m Jewish.” “You’re Jewish? Wow, that’s amazing. So is my boss.” Frankly, at this Grand Opening I was surprised that so many waited on line to buy things others didn’t want. They were overjoyed to have what others threw away. They rejoiced over recycled stuff.

That’s what happens at the end of Jesus’ story about the prodigal son: the father throws a party for a boy the rest of the world wants to throw away. God throws a party when anyone finds their way back to Him. Since Easter we’ve looked at 5 Awakenings which help us find our way back to God. These awakenings don’t just happen the first time we find our way back; we continue to have them as we follow Jesus. We’ve talked about:

**Awakening to Longing:** We have God-given longings for love, purpose, and meaning. Yet when we try to satisfy these longings, we often turn away from God instead of towards Him.

**Awakening to Regret:** When we seek to fill these longings apart from God we often fall into a “Sorry Cycle” of longing and regret. In this awakening, we discover we can start over.

**Awakening to Help:** This is when we admit we are powerless to fulfill our longings on our own. We discover there is help and that help has a name. His name is Jesus.

**Awakening to Love:** As we reach out for help, we discover God loves us deeply. He’s waiting for us. He runs to us. In this awakening we receive our true, God-given identity as a profoundly loved, unconditionally accepted child of God.

Finally, we come to **Awakening to Life**. The truth is: life often doesn't feel very alive. Have you ever felt like you're going through life, but there's no life going through you? Today we address this question: How do we continually awaken to life? The prayer of the 5th Awakening is: "God if you are real, make yourself real to me. Awaken in me the confidence that I can live a brand-new life." The reason Jesus came is to give us life. He told his followers:

I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

Some translations say, "Abundant life." What do you think when you hear "Abundant life?" Typically we think of the word "MORE." An "abundant life" or "full life" sounds like "MORE." More money in my bank account and 401k. More satisfying relationships. More beach vacations. As a culture we love the word "MORE." Marketers know this. That's why they promise us: "You get 25% MORE potato chips in the jumbo bag," "Get MORE cash back with this credit card," "Get MORE frequently flyer miles." We define fullness of life as MORE. Not Jesus.

The original language of the New Testament has two words for "life." One is the word BIOS. It's the root word for biology. BIOS means "natural life." It can also refer to chronological life. The average BIOS life includes 250,000 hours of sleep, 76,000 meals, and 200,000 trips to the bathroom. All of that is a part of a BIOS life. But there's another word for "life" in the Bible: ZOE. ZOE includes the BIOS type of life but goes way beyond it. BIOS is about quantity of life and "more" of the same; but ZOE is about the quality of life that only comes from knowing God. ZOE life begins now and goes on past death into eternity. When Jesus says, "I have come that they may have abundant life" guess which life word he uses? Right, ZOE! Jesus is not offering "more" of the same life. He wants to give us a quality life with God which is richer, fuller, deeper. When you find your way back to God, you discover the ZOE life.

Now in the story of the prodigal son we see this contrast between BIOS life and ZOE life. "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. (Luke 15:11-12)

Believe it or not, the Greek word translated as "property" is the word "BIOS." That sounds strange until you realize when we talk about our property and income we still sometimes call it our "livelihood" or making a "living." Later in the parable, when the son returns, the father cries,

Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:23-24)

When the father says, 'My son is *alive* again' the word is not BIOS but ZOE. What's the difference? Plenty of people know how to make a living. But few discover how to have a life. In the parable, the father says, "I'll give you all the BIOS life you want, but someday you will realize that MORE won't fully satisfy." The BIOS life pales in comparison to the ZOE life with the Father. God doesn't want us to settle for the BIOS life. He created us for the ZOE life, to have life to the full; life with him. He celebrates our grand opening to ZOE life!

We, however, get stuck on the BIOS life. I'll show you. There is another son in this parable: the older son. These verses come right after preparations for the party begin.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ (Luke 15:25-30)

Every time I teach this parable I ask this question: Does the older brother have a right to be angry? The almost universal response is: YES! Yet when I ask, “Do you think the father loves the younger son more than the elder?” The answer is almost always: No. What’s the difference? If you focus on the BIOS - the property, ring, shoes, robe and BBQ beef - it’s enough to make you resentful. It may even remind you of a time your parents favored one of your siblings. But if you focus on the love you find a father who showers love on both boys. He is willing to joyfully give away all he has to both of them just so they can be a family again.

The older son is stuck on the BIOS. He describes himself as a slave who obeys orders. He wants a goat so he can go celebrate in a corner with his friends, not with his dad. He views his entire relationship with his father as a commercial proposition. I do this for you, you owe that to me. Sure he stayed close to home, but he strayed far from his loving father long ago.

Just as the father ran to the younger son, he comes out and pleads with his older son.

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:31-32)

He reassures his grumbling son that all the possessions are still his. He doesn’t have to slave for a single one. They are a father’s gracious gift. Grace and unconditional love come to the older son with an invitation. “Your brother is alive. He’s had a grand opening to the ZOE life. Stop worrying about BIOS. Don’t stand out here grumbling. You can have a grand opening. Come to the party and receive ZOE life.”

Who is the older son? Sometimes he’s us – the good church going folk who do all the right things, color within the lines, and never go astray. I find it funny that the Greek word for “older son” is Presbyterian. Yet we also stray from God – sometimes in word and deed, in thought and in heart. We can’t see our sins as well as we see others’. The question is: would we rather fold our arms and grumble about the BIOS or come to the party, have a grand opening and receive God’s ZOE life? What’s it like to live a ZOE kind of life?

**CELEBRATE: We Love God.** Before Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son, he tells two other stories in which something is lost and found. In the first story a shepherd loses one of his hundred sheep. When he finds the sheep,

He calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” (Luke 15:6)

In the second story a woman loses one of her ten valuable coins. When she finds it,

She calls her friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.” (Luke 15:9)

Finally there is the third story about the lost son which ends with the father inviting the whole village to a celebration for his son. All three stories end with a party!

If you have found your way back to God, you have a great reason to celebrate! God gives you pardon for the past, peace in the present, promise for the future. That’s why we gather here every week: to celebrate our Father’s love for us and our love for Him. We call one style of worship here Celebration but really all our services are celebrations of God’s love. We call Holy Communion “the joyful feast of the people of God.” Jesus did not describe heaven as a somber place. His favorite description of heaven is a party. If we want to embrace the ZOE kind of life we need to consistently come to God’s party and celebrate his love!

When we regularly celebrate God’s love for us, our relationship with him grows deeper. Whether you celebrate in a quiet place alone or with hundreds of people, God loves to spend time with you! He wants to express His love for you and receive love from you. If you started praying daily before Easter or during the 30 day wager – don’t stop. Keep praying and worshipping. Keep expressing your love for God. When I came home worn out from the Easter Sunday services recently I walked into my house and experienced a joy I have not received in years: my grandson Ben came running to meet me with a hug at the door just as his father and aunt used to do years ago. That is what I live for. That’s the kind of life God wants to have with you. Celebrating is the first experience that helps us live a ZOE kind of life.

**CONNECT: Grow in Grace.** Edward Hallowell and a team of Harvard Medical School researchers discovered the two most meaningful experiences in life are Achieving (accomplishing something worthwhile) and Connecting (relating to someone in a significant way). According to Hallowell, our society is more and more obsessed with achieving yet increasingly poor at connecting. Achieving is not bad but it’s no substitute for connecting. Strong achievers, who fail to connect, end up unhappy. By contrast, people who connect in meaningful relationships, even if they’re not great achievers, still report life as fulfilling.

This is the way God designed us. The way to experience the ZOE kind of life is by connecting with others who’ve found their way back to God. We are better together. We grow in God’s grace, we grow more like Jesus when we connect with and work with other believers. We all need the encouragement and accountability of others to grow in the grace of Jesus. A large gathering like this is great for celebrating but it’s not always good for connecting. That’s why we encourage everyone to find a Growth Group where you can get to know other followers of Jesus and invest in each other’s lives. The Father wants us to receive his love through each other and we experience the ZOE kind of life as God intends for us.

**CONTRIBUTE: Share with Others.** God has a dream for this world, and you’re invited to be a part of it. His dream is that every single person will know they are passionately loved by God. His dream is that every single person will experience the ZOE kind of life. God’s dream is that every person will find their way back to Him. God invites you to share this dream with

others. You have a part to play in God's dream! His desire is for you to take a risk and love others because God has risked everything in loving you. Jesus says we can only keep what we give away (Mark 8:35).

There are people who are far from God and trying to find their way back home. Many of them don't even know it. The question is: are we willing to share with others God's love and God's ZOE life? Our next message series is called "THRIVE." Some plants just survive. But a truly alive plant thrives – it scatters the seed of life. Now that you have found your back to God, the best way to grow the abundant ZOE life is to give it away. Jesus said you only get to keep what you give away. We'll learn how to give away God's love and life. We'll learn how to help others awaken to love and life. We'll discover how to help others find their way back to God and have a grand opening that's worth celebrating!

Lane Hunter is a guy who's living the ZOE kind of life. Eight years ago, Dave Ferguson, pastor of Community Christian Church sat in Lane's living room. But Lane was sitting. He was lying in a hospital bed that hospice workers delivered to make his last days comfortable. He asked Dave to come over because it was time to plan his funeral. As Lane told him what he wanted to said, sung, and celebrated at his memorial, Dave remembered how a few years earlier Lane had a grand opening and found his way back to God.

Lane was a type-A, driven personality who started his workday at 5 a.m. and finished late in the evening. His obsessive hard work paid off. He took his company from a \$100 million business to more than \$9 billion. Then came his terminal illness which forced this ambitious workaholic to a complete stop. When Lane paused long enough to reflect on his life and success, he realized there was something very important missing. As a kid, his parents took him to church and he had a genuine faith in God. In time, his unbridled pursuit of success made God a faint and forgotten memory. Now Lane was sick, the kind of sick that would slowly kill him. His body was wracked with constant pain sixteen hours a day. The illness created a grand opening in his life. He opened up to the fact that he needed God. Lane told Dave, "From the time I got sick, it refocused me. It caused me to find my way back to God and feel so close to God. I would give up everything for what I have now."

Dave still has the notes for Lane's funeral. They have never been used. It's nearly a decade since hospice was called, and Lane is still alive. He's not cured. He is in pain every day of his life. But since his spiritual rebirth, Lane is living a new kind of life. He's not a workaholic creating his own kingdom. Instead, he is a messenger sharing his story and helping others find their way back to God. The experience of going from death to life, from lost to found will do that to you. Lane has one ultimate mission in life: to help people find their way back to God. There's nothing that grows your new ZOE life more than helping others find new life. Let's help others have a grand opening to the ZOE life.

Then heaven will throw a party!