

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, September 24, 2017**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Luke 15:11-32**  
**Sermon Part I: Hospitality Part I**

I want to divide this sermon into two parts. In the first part: hospitality – the case against it.

Think of all the reasons that you can come up with why the father in Jesus' parable should have refused to show hospitality toward his younger son when he returned, the one who gets the unfair billing as the star of the parable.

» The son started out with every opportunity to enjoy his privileged status as a child of a wealthy family. But he chose to walk away from all that.

» The son made the shockingly inappropriate and improper request to be given the share of his father's estate, the inheritance that he would normally receive only when his father died. In effect, by making that request while his father was still alive, he was wishing his father dead.

» The son blew his inheritance on prostitutes and dissolute living. He squandered all that he had living a life of unabashed self-indulgence and hedonism.

» Admittedly, he had hit rock bottom, and been forced to do what must have seemed to him to be a menial and humiliating job feeding pigs. But he had driven himself down to that point. No-one had forced him into the life he had lived: it was his own poor decisions and terrible life-choices that landed him there.

» Also admittedly, his father's hired hands did have bread enough and to spare, while he was dying of hunger. But they at least earned their bread through hard work, honest toil, and the sweat of their brow.

» Why couldn't he just have taken after his much more sensible, responsible older brother? Speaking as the oldest brother in my family, I admit that one rings particularly true with me. What made him think that his father would consider him responsible enough to give him a job and treat him like one of his hired hands?

At some time or another, we have probably heard all of these reasons, and

maybe more, used to argue against the social safety nets that are in place in any caring society today. They may have been used primarily by privileged fiscal conservatives and right-wing elitists, but they are out there. And to privileged fiscal conservatives and right-wing elitists, they are perfectly justifiable.

But...

## **Sermon Part 2: Hospitality – the case for it.**

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. He called his servants and ordered the preparations for a party – actually it sounds more like a feast – to celebrate the fact that “this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” Luke 15:24.

No recriminations. No anger. No demand for an apology. No requirement for penitence. No expectation of payback. No “I told you so’s.” The speech that the prodigal had thought out and was carefully prepared to deliver, swept aside, utterly dismissed. Human need, in its fullest sense of both physical need and emotional need, identified, recognized, addressed, and met.

A week ago Friday, a woman called at the church, desperate for help. She had no food in the house for her three children, and had not sent them to school that day because she had nothing to give them for their lunches. I was able to give her enough food for the weekend from the frozen meals we keep in the freezer downstairs. These come from the Northern Hospitality program.

If you don’t know what Northern Hospitality is, let me tell you briefly. From September to May, New St James Presbyterian Church, along with Trinity Lutheran Church, Colborne Street United Church, and St Michael and All Angels Roman Catholic Church, take it week about to provide a free meal to anyone who wants to come. It is a good, filling, nutritious meal, and there

is no charge for it. Members of the team prepare the meal, cook it, serve it and clear up afterwards. The guests simply need to show up and eat. Last Monday evening, the team from New St James catered their first dinner of the new session. They served between 90 and 100 people.

Some of the guests are clearly living rough. Some of the guests have obviously had better lives in the past, but have fallen on hard economic times. Some of the guests may have mental problems and have nowhere else to turn for a friendly face and a decent meal. Some of the guests are elderly, some of them living alone, and simply not wanting to eat alone. Some of the guests are children, brought there by their parents.

That really tears me up: some of the guests at a Northern Hospitality meal in a city as prosperous as London are children.

The number of people using community meal programs in London has increased by 124% in the last ten years; 3,600 families access the London Foodbank each month; and there are 20 other foodbanks and food depots across the city. These are the shocking statistics uncovered by the London Poverty Research Centre at King's University College.

The London Poverty Research Centre is working to increase awareness of the poverty in London, and to find ways to address it. There is no doubt that the Northern Hospitality program is just part of a band-aid solution to a much bigger problem. But until that much bigger problem is addressed and poverty is eliminated, the least we can do is go on feeding the children.

Of course, that's only one aspect of hospitality, and New St James does much more. We welcome the stranger. We open our doors to the newcomer. We help people learn English. We guide people through bureaucratic channels that are hard enough for native English-speakers to navigate, let alone new immigrants. We offer rides to and from church and other appointments. We go out of our way to include people from other lands and other cultures. We rejoice when they become independent of our help, and find their way into Canadian life and society.

In fact, we try to do anything but respond in the churlish, ill-tempered way the prodigal's older brother did. Our role model is and must always be the loving father. For though the parable is a story of human relationships and family tensions, it points us to a greater relationship and a greater family: to our relationship with our loving Father and our place in the community that is the family of God.