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Sermon Transcript: Partnership

So last week I brought up the story of the prodigal son and I was said, "Oh, this really connects with what we've been reading in Philemon, but we don't have time for that today." Well, we got time today. And so I—not—maybe you're not all familiar with the story of the prodigal son. Let's just do a quick little recap. Comes from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus tells this story. He's like, "Okay, there was this father and he had two sons and the younger son comes to the father and he's like, 'I wish you were dead.'" I mean, he doesn't exactly say that, but what he says is, "I want my half of the inheritance," which in that culture is the equivalent of saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead. I'm done with you. Give me my money." And so, the father does it. And then it tells the story and it says this younger brother ran off and went out and squandered all that money, all that he had gotten from his father in dissolute living. Now that's your Bible's way of saying he did naughty stuff, okay? Like that's not—he didn't go out and like volunteer at the food pantry, okay? I mean, he didn't spend all that money taking care of people or spreading joy, naughty stuff, okay? So he goes off, does naughty stuff, blows all the money, and then he gets so bad he starts working on this farm and he's taking care of pigs. And so for a good little Jewish boy hanging out with pigs, that is not the ideal job. It doesn't go in the top 10 list of Jewish parents' hopes for their children in this time period. And so they—so he's doing this job. He's like, "I would even eat the pig food at this point." That's how desperate I am, how hungry I am. And then he goes, "Hey, wait a minute. My father has servants, has slaves that they are well-fed. They have a place to stay. They live better than this. I'm just going to go back to my dad and I'm going to say, 'Dad, I sinned against heaven and against you. I'm really sorry. Just make me one of your servants.'" That's the plan. So he goes back, but before he can even get into town, get to his dad's place, his dad sees him from far away and goes running out to greet him. And here's the thing, that dad is already kind of like the laughing stock of the community. "You did what? You gave that little brat his inheritance." I mean, maybe word even went around as like what would—what have you done with the money? And so—and so he's exposing himself running out there to greet him. And also in this culture, it's just not dignified for a father to go running out like that. But he does it anyway. It's an extravagant move. He goes out there and the son starts up his rehearsed speech that was told to us earlier in the parable. The son goes, "I've sinned against heaven and against you." And the father's like, "Well, forget about that. Quick, get him the best robe. Put it on him. Get him a ring, put it on his finger. Get him some nice sandals, put them on his feet. Let's have a party. We're going to get the fatted calf. We're going to have a big old barbecue. We're going to have music. It's going to be fun." And the son never gets to offer himself up as a servant. That's how gracious the father's reaction is. Just upon seeing him return, a full restoration happens.

So, the party's going ding-ding-ding and all. And this is the point where sometimes in church we stop at this verse. Isn't that great? Went away, did the naughty stuff, but dad welcomes him back. Yay. End of story. But if you read just a little bit further, you find out, remember there were two sons. So then the other son, he's out working in the field and he's like, "What's going on in the house?" And he calls everyone—the servants like, "Hey, what's going on in the house?" He's like, "Oh, it's great. Your brother's back and your dad—ah, he killed a fatted calf. We're having a big old barbecue. There's a party going on. You should go inside." And so this is not the NRSV I'm reading to you right now. This is a—this is the RD version. Rob Dyer. So anyway, so he's like, "You ought to go in." And you know, funny enough, the older brother is not thrilled. I don't know if

any of you are the rule follower amongst your siblings such that this would irritate you the same way. Some of you are a little bit more like the younger son, but we're not going to get into that right now. But the older son is mad. He's furious. He's like, "I'm not going in there." But eventually the dad comes on out. The dad comes out and he's like, "Hey, come on in." And he's like, "Listen"—he's not very nice about it—"Listen, this son of yours"—I was really glad it ended with yours—"this son of yours went out and squandered your money on prostitutes." He went right to it. He didn't go on dissolute living. He's like on prostitutes. "And then when he comes back, you kill a fatted calf, throw a party. I've been working for you this whole time and not once did you even throw a little party. I couldn't even have a goat. I didn't even get a goat to hang to have a party with my friends and you threw this big old party for him. It's ridiculous." And the father says, "But this brother of yours was lost and is now found, was dead, is now alive. It—we had to celebrate the end." What I mean, if I was sitting with Jesus, I'd be like, "And then what happened?" But it's like Jesus went, "And that's the end of the story." But in a similar way, Philemon does the same thing to us. Hey, Philemon, we need you to take in Onesimus. I know he did you wrong, but I want you to receive him. And it's like we did—he—did he? We don't know. We don't get Philemon 2. We get just this letter.

This letter, which is about the relationship they have, which the prodigal son is just exactly like that. Because if you look at what happens to the prodigal son, like the father comes out to talk to the older son who's mad and he's like, "This son of yours"—he could have said when my brother came back, but he doesn't even consider him a brother anymore. He's like, "This son of yours that did all this stuff." But listen to what the father did. The father reminded him that they are connected. He's like, "Yes, everything that I have is yours, but this brother of yours has come back to us." He reminds him of the relationship. And based on that, there's a need for forgiveness and for reconciliation. And Paul is saying to Philemon that look, I know Onesimus did something wrong and there's a debt. There's a problem here. But here's what I want you to do. I want you to welcome him just as you would welcome me. And if there's any kind of debt that he owes you, if there's something that he did wrong that needs to be paid back, put it on my tab. I'll cover it. That must have been pretty heavy to get that. Look, it's going to be covered. Just in the same way that the father and the prodigal son welcome back another son, Paul is welcoming in a new kind of partnership, a new kind of connection with Onesimus and then suggests to Philemon, you got to do the same. And then what comes right after that is Paul saying, "Oh, and by the way, I hope to come by and visit sometime. Set up a room for me." It's the only hotel reservation in the Bible. It's like, "Oh, can I get a room? Non-smoking, two queen beds. Can you set that up for me?" And I think Paul did this on purpose because he says, "I want you to welcome him the way you would welcome me, which probably made Philemon go..." And he goes, "And any debt that he owes you, I got it covered. Put it on my account." Which maybe Philemon went... And then he went, "Now I'm going to come visit. Prepare a room for me." Which would make Philemon go, "Oh, oh, we got to get a room ready for Paul. I mean, he's good with Paul. Paul's great, right?" And then I bet it clicked for Philemon. "Oh, I should welcome Onesimus the same way that I'd be welcoming you, Paul. I see what you did there. You made me think about what it means to welcome you. You made me think of what the standard is that I have to live up to with this bozo Onesimus who's finally coming back."

What did he do? You see the word there that talks about this partnership that's in Philemon and it's also talked about in the Philippians passage that we had. The word there is *koinonia* in the Greek and it means—well, sometimes we translate it as fellowship, but I'm telling you partnership because you're Presbyterian. And if I say fellowship, you think of eating and like hanging out in a big room downstairs. So fellowship, it's like it's the Christian word for fun, right? We're not allowed to have fun because we're Christians. We got to

have fellowship with one another. But it's the same word. We just translate it different ways, but it really does have more of the idea of a partnership in that it makes you—it shares whatever debts the one has, you have your partners. Whatever wealth you have, the other has. This partnership is more than just we like to eat casseroles together. It's real fellowship, partnership in what's being asked here. The tough thing about being in partnership with Paul is it means now he's got to be in partnership with Onesimus. This should not be foreign to you. Sometimes you have a partnership, but the problem is that partners come with partners. Sometimes they're called in-laws. You didn't pick the in-laws. You picked the partner. But guess what comes with the package right now? I hit jackpot. I have great in-laws. And it's not just because they're right there watching on Zoom right now. Tom and Dory, you're amazing. But it really is—it is genuinely true. They're wonderful people. Feel very blessed. I know not everybody gets that package deal, right? In fact, like right now, the partners that my kids have—they currently have—they're wonderful. They're wonderful. You're a blessing. You are. You're amazing. And I'm not just saying that because one of them is here. No, really, you know, and I feel very blessed. Not everybody gets that. So, you know, anytime we all get together, it can be there sometimes, but I know that's not always true. Sometimes partners come with partners that are right. And we're called in our faith to extend the partnership that we have already through love a little further. And sometimes those partnerships extend out to people maybe haven't wronged us, but we're just not really naturally connected to. We formed partnership with Brightpoint, which puts us in partnership with those 45 families. Thanks be to God. We get to be in partnership with them. But that's what it means to be in that type of fellowship partnership that he's talking about here. It's what we're called to do.

Some of you are going to have a challenging week. It's Thanksgiving and not everybody who shows up at that table is on your top 10 list of favorite people. Maybe you're not on their top 10 list. I know. It's like I don't know. I don't know which way it goes. But like this is a time when we think about being thankful and also we think about putting up with people. How do we navigate such situations? I do think though that with Thanksgiving we have this wonderful opportunity if we keep the focus that our Thanksgiving is an expression of our faith. I learned something really cool this past week because I've been taking Thai language lessons and learning Thai language and I was asking my teacher, "How do you say Thanksgiving in Thai?" Because it's not their holiday, right? And she said, "Oh, yeah, *khob khun phra chao*," which literally means thank you, God. And I said, "That's a really interesting word for Thanksgiving." And I said, "Yes, for me as a person of faith, Thanksgiving is about thank you, God, but not always for everyone." And then she asked me where it came from. And I said, "Well, there was this meal, but the meal probably never really happened, but we celebrated it anyway. And there's some problematic things historically, but we're just thankful. We're just thankful to come together." I said it's really more about food nowadays. But and when we come together, there's an amazing opportunity we have and that's to truly be in partnership with everybody who's in that room. In the partnership that Paul had, he said, "When I remember you, I thank God for you." And that remembering and being thankful isn't because that other person is the living embodiment of perfection. It's because you've acknowledged there's a partnership here. And because I got received like a prodigal son, because I got received like an Onesimus, I'm going to receive others with full love. And so we're going to come to the table and I think there's a lot of really wonderful things that we as people of faith can do if you're so fortunate as to be gathering with other people on Thanksgiving. And if those people are people of faith, wouldn't it be wonderful if you just took a moment before the meal and said that when I think of all of you, I'm grateful to God. Maybe even in that moment to offer up a prayer, a blessing at the table where you name every single person by name. Whether that's just one person across the table from you or maybe one person on the phone because you can't get together with anyone this year, but whatever your connection is

on Thanksgiving, whatever one you make that it's done with praying for someone by name. Do you know how powerful it is to hear someone thank God for you by name and how embarrassingly infrequent we do that for one another out loud? I think that's something that maybe we as people of faith could bring to our expression of thank you, God. Oh, I mean Thanksgiving that we celebrate.

But maybe you're gathering with folks and not everybody's on the Jesus train. Okay? And that's okay. Another way to bring in this type of reflection and understanding of the partnership and connection we have with one another. And you can say, "Hey everybody, say something you're grateful for." That's a lovely tradition, too, some of you have. But what if you said, "Hey everybody, what if we just remember and say out loud the name of someone who's really been in our corner this year, who's really been there for us this year?" And you invite everybody to say the name of someone to remember someone and then to have that turn into gratitude. That might be a really nice thing, too. And they don't have to be on the Jesus train to do that. People like remembering what they're grateful for. That's another way you can bring that spirit of partnership in. And then let's just go ahead and say it out loud that there are—as we—there's some people that it's hard for you to receive, to forgive, to tolerate. It's that one person at the table who seems to be searching for an argument. Desperately searching for an argument. "Let me bring up another topic that's going to cause trouble at the table this year." I don't know why some people do this, but some people do. And there's a moment where you could say, "Well, hold on. Let me get my righteous block out so I can step on top of it and start arguing." But maybe this is the year where you receive that person and whatever debt or offense they're causing to you, you put it on God's account. You let Jesus take that one. And it can even be a little prayer. You go, "Jesus, I can't handle that. You got to have that one." And just create some space because a lot of the people who act like that and talk like that are hurting themselves, are feeling some kind of insecurity. Why would anyone choose argument if there wasn't some kind of pain there? And for one day, for one day, you can be about a gracious kind of love that's about as ridiculous as a father running out and forgiving a wild son. That's as ridiculous as welcoming back a servant who has betrayed you just because your good buddy Paul told you it was a good thing to do. That would be just as ridiculous as a god who would put up with you. Because as Martin Luther said in his introduction to Philemon, we are all Onesimus. We are all Onesimus. Take the love and forgiveness that you have received from Christ and scoop some of that out onto everybody's plate this Thanksgiving and pray for one another and see what that does. Hallelujah. Amen.