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LOCKER LIFE-SAVERS: A PARTY INVITATION Michael B. Beough
Luke 15:20-32 July 27, 2008
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We are talking about things our kids can put in their lockers to help them stay strong, safe, and successful in the crowded hallways of life. If they don't have a locker, maybe they can put these things in their book bag. Ultimately, of course, I hope they keep them in their hearts. I believe these locker life-savers can make a difference in their school experience this year and for the rest of their lives.

Last week we talked about a birthright from God. It is a good thing to have in their lockers to help them remember what rights they have as a child of God, their inheritance in heaven... We said, "Don't let anyone take that from you." Get the sermon on our website.

Here is something else I want our kids to keep in their lockers – A Party Invitation. I don't want them to miss the greatest party ever given.

What makes a party great? Does anyone not like going to parties?

I remember as a teenager how important parties were to me. Getting invited to a party meant – well, everything. The right party invitation meant – well, more than everything. You knew you belonged when you got invited to a party. At least, that is what we thought. Didn't always work out that way.

I love this story in Luke 15 about the father who threw a party when his lost and wayward son came home. Everybody got invited. Everybody belonged.

Remember what we call this wayward son? The prodigal son. Left the family farm and wasted his whole inheritance. Came back home when he was flat broke because of his immoral living. Hoped his father would at least hire him as a field hand. Sleeping out in the barracks with the field hands would be a sight better than sleeping curled up next to a pig in a pig sty. That's where he ended up. That's what his life had come to. Now, I've never slept in a pig sty, but I can just imagine what that would be like. I've seen pig sties. I've smelled them. I've been in the doghouse before but never in a pig sty. I don't want to end up in either one of them. Do you? Nothing against pigs. Or dogs, for that matter. Just don't want to go there.

Well, this wayward son came home begging to be hired, and the father did the most outrageous thing. He swallowed his own pride, and welcomed his son home like the son was a returning war hero who had just saved the world. Threw the biggest party anyone had ever seen. Went around telling anyone who would listen that his son who was lost is now found. What a dad!

The cool thing about this dad is that he wanted everybody at the party. Even tried to get his other son to attend. He was the one who resented what his father was doing for his undeserving brother. He was the one who whined that the father had never given him a party like that. He was the one whose heart was filled with bitterness, the one whose heart was eaten up by envy. The father even wanted this son to come to the party. Said he loved him more than life itself. Reminded him that he would inherit the entire farm in due time. "Please come the party."

Like I said, it was a party where everyone was welcome, no matter who you were, no matter what you did. You belonged. Not at all like some of those parties our kids get invited to, or want to get invited to. The purpose of lots of parties is exactly the opposite of inclusion. They are precisely planned to separate the cool kids from the not so cool kids. I know. I was a not-so-cool kid. Hard to imagine, I know. I did get to be chaplain of the high school band when such things were allowed, and the president of the National Honor Society. Neither of those exactly qualified me for the parties that I assumed all the really cool guys and good looking girls went to after football games.

About the most exciting party I ever went to after games was to join some band geeks out on Goose Creek Bay down near Houston, Texas, trying to catch alligator gars. It was like a religious experience.

It would be dark with only a camp fire providing light. We would walk to the edge of the water and throw our hooks as far out as we could. Then we would set them down leaning them against a log or a chair.

Next came the religious part. With our toes just at the water's edge, we would put our arms out and hands together like the snout of an alligator gar. Then we would open our arms like a mouth and we would say, "O Great Gar, come take our bait." We said it to the right. We said it to the left. We said it straight ahead. We called them to us from out of that murky dirty oily water that washed up from the ship channel that ran down to Houston. Then we waited.

Usually we caught nothing, but one night we caught a really big gar. We had never thought what we would do with one if we caught it. Someone suggested we throw it on the fire and cook it. So we did. The whole thing. We didn't clean it. We didn't want all that icky stuff from inside on our hands. We just threw the whole thing on the fire and left it there for about an hour. Finally, someone suggested we eat it, went to the house and got a hatchet, came back and hacked into its back. I don't remember if anyone else tried. I saw the white meat, reached down, pulled out a piece and stuck it in my mouth – for about a second. The taste was so disgusting that I spit it out. It tasted just like the murky dirty oily water that washed up from the ship channel that ran down to Houston.

I have often wondered what a sociologist would have made out of our behavior. Teenage boys, lined up along the shore, praying to the Great Gar. Maybe frustrated geeks trying to reel in a big fish but never quite catching what we really wanted most in life – to be accepted by those really cool kids and good looking girls who were having a whole lot more fun than we were.

I guess I could say that I felt I belonged at our geek party, but here is what I have come to realize. Even our party was not for everyone. We knew who we wanted there and who we didn't. We were pretty sure we knew who would laugh us out of school if they ever found out we had such parties. Praying to gars, for pete's sake! What is this world coming to?!

That's a good question. What is this world coming to? Well, I can't answer for the whole world, but I know what I want our kids to come to. I want them to come to the party like the one the father threw for his son. I want them to know that they have a standing invitation to this party. And I want them to know that this is the greatest party ever given.

The party I am talking about is the one where everybody belongs. Those who don't seem to deserve an invitation, like the prodigal son, belong. They are welcome. They are never turned away. Those who want to leave some people off the invitation list, like the other son, and keep the party just for those they feel comfortable with, they belong, too. They are welcome to come to the party to experience the father's love.

What makes this party so great is that it vibrates and hums with the welcoming love of our heavenly Father.

So let's look at the Invitation:

Whom it is for: YOU!

The party theme: LOST, BUT FOUND

May seem like a funny theme, but this party is for all who are lost. For all who feel lost and alone, for all who have lost the way, for all who are filled with jealousy and resentment, for all who feel left out and left over and forgotten and ignored, for all who don't think they belong.

Where: AT YOUR LOCAL CHURCH

This party can happen anywhere, but it most often happens at your local church. Now I know that church sometimes doesn't seem like a party. That's too bad. But in churches that focus on the difference Jesus makes in people's lives, it is usually always party time. In those churches, young people experience acceptance and forgiveness and affirmation and give their lives to Jesus, and it starts feeling like a party.

When: FOR ALL ETERNITY

The party begins now and runs for all eternity. Jesus often spoke of heaven being like a big party, a banquet filled with great food and deep fellowship. Jesus seemed to enjoy parties, like the wedding feast at Cana where he saved the party by turning water into wine. Where did we ever get the idea that heaven is a dull place where you sit around on clouds playing harps? I expect Heaven to be a party to beat all parties.

What to bring: YOURSELF

Nothing but yourself. Your heart, your mind, your strength. The only gift to bring is all that you are and all that you want to be.

Hosted by: JESUS

The King of kings and Lord of lords. Died a terrible death to bring us hope and life. To turn sorrow into joy. To overcome death with victory. To break down the barriers that divide and separate us. When all is said and done, it will be a party filled with adoration and praise for the One who takes us in and never lets us go.

I want our kids to keep this invitation in their lockers, and I want them to come to the party. I want them to know that whatever happens in school, whether they are the in crowd or the out crowd, they always have a party where they belong. This is the party that can help them stay strong, safe, and successful in the crowded hallways of life.