

Sunday, July 17, 2022

## A Gracious Community

(Series: "Stories of Jesus" – The Lost Younger Son)

(Message Five)

(Luke 15:11-24)

### Scripture

*<sup>11</sup>Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

*<sup>13</sup>"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup>After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup>He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*<sup>17</sup>"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup>I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup>So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*<sup>21</sup>"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

*<sup>22</sup>"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup>For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

*<sup>25</sup>"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup>'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'*

*<sup>28</sup>"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' <sup>31</sup>'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup>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.'"*

## Message:

The dominant assumption among Christians (and non-Christians) is that God loves you **most** when we are **good**; that is, that God's love is conditional.

We assume our behavior impacts how God feels about us. we innately believe God loves the *good guys* (people like us) more than the *bad guys* (people like them).

Consequently, God's love and acceptance always feels somewhat in flux. It is as if God sits in a swivel (rocking) chair smiling at us as long as we keep our minds, hands, and hearts pure, but when we sin, God turns his back on us. The only way to get God to turn back to us is by resuming our good behavior.

We came by this idea naturally. Parents constantly remind their children if they want to amount to something and *get ahead*, they need good grades, to conform to people's expectations, always look and do their best, and impress the boss...and don't forget, God is watching you closely (closer than *the elf on the shelf*).

It's just natural that our performance-focused world has infiltrated our faith community. But this story **refutes** that **narrative**: Jesus welcomed sinners. He dines with them (a sign of love and acceptance). Jesus reflects his Father in character, attitude, and action.

**Our story this morning, traditionally known as "The Prodigal Son" is a story about two sons and their father's extraordinary love.** We've heard the story so often the shocking parts no longer shock us like they should; meanwhile entire books have been written about this five-hundred-word short story.

The word *prodigal* means, "**recklessly** extravagant" or "**spending everything**." We attach the word to the youngest son knowing he wasted his father's inheritance. But the father is the most *recklessly extravagant* character in this story – offering his wealth to an ungrateful son and lavishly loving the son when he returns.

This is not primarily a story about a spendthrift boy or a stubborn older

brother, but about God's relationship with **sinners** (and tax collectors – the bad guys) and the self-**righteous** (the good guys who assume they can make God happy by themselves).

**This story can be divided into two parts: “There was a man who had two sons...”** The first part (15:11-23) focuses on the younger son; the second part (15:24-32) focuses on the older son. Both sons are lost. We'll look at the youngest son this morning. The chiastic structure of the first half consists of twelve parts: six parts with a corresponding six parts in inverse order.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) **A Son is Lost** – “Give me my share of the estate.” (15:12)
- (2) **Goods are Wasted** – “...there squandered his wealth in extravagant living.” (15:13)
- (3) **Everything Lost** – “After he had spent everything...he began to be in need.” (15:14)
- (4) **The Great Sin** – “he hired himself out to a [Gentile]...to feed pigs.” (15:15)
- (5) **Total Rejection** – “...no one gave him anything.” (15:16)
- (6) **A Change of Mind** – “He came to his senses...I am starving to death.” (15:17)
- (6) **An Initial Repentance** – “Make me like one of your hired men...” (i.e., I'll pay you back) (15:19)
- (5) **Total Acceptance** – “His Father ran to his son and kissed him...” (15:20)
- (4) **The Great Repentance** – “I am no more worthy to be called your son...” (15:21)
- (3) **Everything Gained** – “Bring the best robe, a ring, and sandals...” (restoration to sonship) (15:22)
- (2) **Goods used in joyful celebration** – “Bring the fatted calf...let's have a feast.” (15:23)
- (1) **A Son is Found** – “My son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found.” (15:24)

It is a familiar passage we often misunderstand. You'll notice there are twelve points. So, let's settle in. ☺

## STORY

### (1) A Son is **Lost** – “Give me my share of the estate.” (15:12)

The younger son does what no other son has ever done: he asks for, **demands**, his share of the **inheritance** so he can go off on his own. This is the son of a wealthy family. There is a sizable inheritance to divide. They have fatted calves and slaves.

For Jesus' listeners, the request is **outrageous** and unthinkable – a (middle eastern) father would never divide up his estate and give control to his sons while still alive.

Kenneth Bailey says he's asked for decades around the Middle East if anyone has ever heard of a son making this request of his father. The answer: Never! Why not? Because the father would have his son **beaten**, dismissed and **disowned** from the family with no way for the rebellious son to come home again – ever!

This request means the son wants his father **dead**; instead, the son becomes “dead” to his family (In a few verses, the father confirms his son was dead and is now alive).

Never mind the not-so-subtle message the son was sending his father or the

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowed and adapted from *Poet and Peasant* by Kenneth Bailey. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1976. Page 160.

hurt and embarrassment it would bring his father in the community or that it meant he would be cutting all ties with his family and community, he wanted his inheritance now!

And while this request is stunningly disrespectful, the father does what no other father would do – he **grants** the **request**: *“He divided his property between them.”*

“Property” is a translation of the Greek “bios” meaning *life*. The request means losing one third (the first-born son gets two-thirds) of his land and property, his family’s name and honor in the community, and the presence and love of his youngest son. The father has been asked to tear his life apart. And he does. The father demonstrates an amazing love granting the request.

Jesus’ listeners would have gasped at the father’s response seeing it as a **shameful capitulation** by the father – simply handing over the family honor and giving the boy license to trample it. The deeper we go, the more we sense a remarkable love.

This father was willing to endure the pain of spurned love and public humiliation rather than disown his son because of his profound love for his son.

Jesus makes it very clear the prodigal’s father is not a **typical father**. Jesus is also saying his Father is not the harsh, aloof God of the Pharisees who cares little for sinners, tax collectors, and those who don’t measure up.

Don’t miss the elder brother who abdicates his responsibility to be the family reconciler. Why isn’t he pursuing his younger brother to bring him home? Why isn’t he distraught over his brother’s rebellion and his father’s grief? Why is he silent?

Why? Because he has no more love for his father than his brother – more next week.

## **(2) Goods are **wasted** – “...there squandered his wealth in extravagant living.” (15:13)**

*“The younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country . . .”*

If a father were to give his sons their inheritance early, they would not be allowed to dispose of it until their father died so he could live from it. He sells if quickly – usually at a loss. This son sells the land (part of the family’s **identity**), takes the money and heads to a **distant** (i.e., Gentile, pagan, place where everything is spiritually unclean) country. He not only leaves his **home** and **family**, but he is also leaving his **heritage** and **faith**.

*“... and there squandered his wealth in wasteful living.”*

He “wastes” his inheritance (The word here is *wasteful*. *Wild* is often used here, but it is not correct). He squanders his inheritance (like the Pharisees and many believers/people do today). (Wild living is not the issue nor the sin in this parable.)

The prodigal has given up prosperity, home, family, heritage, faith, and community for what he thought would be unbridled freedom, lavish living and gratification. In the process, he attracted people who were happy to help spend his money...

Sin is not just **wild** immoral living; sin is not **honoring** the Father; sin is **wasting** the blessings, **spiritual gifts**, resources, and **treasures** God has entrusted to us.

Meanwhile the Pharisees assume Jesus is setting this boy up to be the villain. He is beyond redemption. How could anything be worse? He is a *real* sinner!

### **(3) Everything Lost – “After he had spent everything...he began to be in need.” (15:14)**

A famine spreads throughout the country and, in short order, his life becomes desperate. He finds himself alone, hungry, homeless, with no money, family, faith, or community.

### **(4) The Great Sin – “he hired himself out to a [Gentile]...to feed pigs.” (15:15)**

Instead of going home, he “hires” (lit. attaches, glues) himself to a citizen (a Gentile of means) who most likely wants to rid himself of this young hanger-on and assigns him a task he hopes he’ll refuse. Surely this “Jew” will not herd pigs. Slopping pigs was spiritually defiling, **demeaning** and unthinkable! Yet, there he is living with the swine.

The boy becomes so hungry he longs for the pods the pigs are eating. Carob pods are long string-bean-shaped seed pods that grow on tree-like bushes – inedible for humans and not all that nutritious for livestock – but there is a famine. He not only **tends** to the swine, but he also now longs to **be** swine so he could eat the pods.

Jesus ascribes to this prodigal every defilement and indignity imaginable. He has hit bottom; he appears unredeemable. He has **nothing** to offer. He is the picture of every **sinner –lost**.

### **(5) Total Rejection – “...no one gave him anything.” (15:16)**

The Pharisees had long accused Jesus of being “soft” on sin and sinners.

Jesus here responds, “You misunderstand. I take sin very seriously. Let me explain. Sin is like a young Jewish boy who wishes his father dead by asking

for his inheritance. Then he sells his portion of the father's estate while his father is still healthy and travels to a far (pagan) country, wastes his entire inheritance with Gentiles and ends up feeding pigs! That is my view of sin."

Pharisees: "Wow. Amen! We agree! We couldn't have said it any better ourselves!"

**(6) A Change of Mind – “He came to his senses...I am starving to death.” (15:17)**

In a moment of “deep” reflection, the prodigal realizes his life **stinks**. Since he has no other place to go, he decides to go back *home*, hope his father will listen to him, and ask/beg his father to hire (and train him) as a craftsman. This **plan** is not yet **repentance**.

The prodigal is still trying to fix it **himself**. He has one last deeply humiliating card to play – which is why he hasn't played it yet. But he is now desperate; his pride is not worth dying for; he still longs to save face. He will ask to be a “hired hand.” He is still not looking for grace.

He knows returning to the “family” is out of the question – he messed that up big time. He knows his father's servants are better off than he is right now. He knows a confession will be required, so he **composes** one: “*Right now, today, I am not worthy to be called your son...*” But I plan on being worthy at some point.

**(6) An Initial Repentance – “Make me like one of your craftsmen...” (15:19).**

“*Father, if you'd be willing to train me to be a craftsman, I'll make it right! I'll make myself worthy, again! I lost the money. I'll repay the money.*” He thinks it is about money!

There are three levels of relationships and service: a **son** (daughter) who serves without needed to be urged and who expects nothing in return; a **craftsman** who expects to be paid for everything he or she does; and a **slave** who serves out of fear of punishment. Assuming sonship is off the table; he selects the next best thing...

The Jewish understanding of repentance is **confession** (check), **compensation** (working on it); and a commitment to **change** – i.e., not do it again (no more inheritance to blow) (check!) For the Pharisees, repentance is the *work* a one did to **earn** God's favor; the son will earn his father's favor.

But will the father be open to a master/craftsmen relationship? Jesus' listeners understood if this prodigal has any hope of a restored relationship with his father, it will take a lifetime of hard work to atone for his callous misdeeds.



**(5) Total Acceptance – “His Father saw him...ran to his son and kissed him...” (15:20)**

*“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him...”* The father wants something more – he wants a **father-son** relationship.

The youngest son has journeyed from a far (unclean) county. He has still not expressed any remorse. He is still trying to fix a problem he cannot solve alone. He is still **far off**.

Don't picture a father watching from a mansion on a hill. His home is in the village, but he has been looking, searching, waiting, longing for what seems like forever...

He knows his son. He knows he will fail at independence. He knows he is arrogant and prideful; he knows he will be treated poorly by the villagers. And then he sees him...

*“[He] is filled with compassion for him and ran to him...”*

Instead of refusing to meet his son or make him wait outside his house for a days before receiving him with cold indifference, this father does another thing no (Middle Eastern) father would ever do...he gathers up his robe and runs to his son.

No self-respecting middle eastern patriarch would ever run or expose his legs. Their long robes made it difficult. Only a child or a servant doing his master's bidding runs. But this father forgets his dignity. He sees only his starving, aching, exhausted son that he had given up for dead coming closer. He runs out in great joy and embraces him.

Here the father takes on the form of a suffering servant willing to leave his home and endure the **humiliation** of running through the streets. It hints of **incarnation**.

*“He threw his arms around him and kissed him.”*

This father wants to protect his son from the abuse he'll face if he walks into the village where he has been disowned. A son who dishonors his father would be cut off by and from the whole community.

By opening his arms and kissing him (instead of his son kissing his feet - proper protocol in these circumstances), the father visually shows his **forgiveness** and acceptance of his son to the whole community. This surprise turn sends a seismic jolt exploding the Pharisees' worldview.

This is no small detail. This is the **heart** and character of God. Even while we are a long way off (sinners), our Father sees us with compassion, runs full stride toward us, and embraces us with open arms: Welcome home, my son.

Welcome home, my daughter.

The shepherd found the sheep; the woman found the coin; the father finds his son. Notice the father forgives and embraces his son before the son makes his confession. Notice repentance is not something we do (“Make me a craftsman, I’ll earn it!”), it is the acceptance that we have been found. The hint of **atonement** here is profound.

#### **(4) The Great Repentance – “I am no more worthy to be called your son...” (15:21)**

The boy speaks: *“Father, I have sinned...I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

He omits the third part of his speech – *“make me one of your craftsmen.”* His father didn’t interrupt his speech; but when he greeted and embraced him, the plan dissolved. To ask now would mean he questioned his father’s forgiveness.

The focus is no longer on the **money** or compensation, it is the Father’s broken **heart**. How much does it cost /take to fix a broken heart? He has no solution. The Father’s broken-ness means the prodigal must surrender his plan to do things, prove things, and build things. The son confesses only his **sin** and his **unworthiness**. And that is **enough**.

#### **(3) Everything Gained – “Bring the best robe, a ring, and sandals...” (15:22)**

In Jesus day, a father could take a son like this before the elders and have him stoned. No one would have given it a second thought. Justice would have been served. Instead, this father offers the prodigal all the rights of a son; his position is restored; he has lost nothing. And every listener knows, he deserves none of it.

Instead of humbling his son, the father honors him with the best **robe**, trusts him with the (family) signet **ring**, and offers him respect by providing **sandals**.

--A son must be dressed appropriately. Bring the best robe – the one the father wears on feast days. Notice he is not told to go clean up first!). The robe covers his dirt.

--Put the signet ring on his finger. Give inheritance squanderer the bank password!

--Put sandals on his feet. Freeman, sons, wear sandals. He is no longer a slave. He is a **son**.

We should note here that there is an audience carefully watching everything.



Nothing happens in a small village without an audience. Everything is common knowledge. They are witnesses. The son is assured the father's offer is genuine.

Everyone, including the Pharisees, would be bewildered/amazed by the father's action. This father has no sense of decor. He sacrifices every shred of dignity by running like a child to offer complete forgiveness to a son that deserved to be punished. Then he showers this **rebellious** young ingrate with honor and **restoration**.

The father gives his son his whole life back...and the son **deserves none** of it!

## **(2) Goods used in joyful **celebration** – “Bring the fatted calf...let's have a feast.” (15:23)**

And now, a feast fit for a king. Jesus provides a wonderful picture of God's **lavish grace**: the father anticipates a banquet where the entire village is invited to attend.

In Jesus' day, meat was kept alive (fresh) until eaten. A fatted calf will feed about 200. Normally lamb would be served; calves were reserved for high-ranking guests and for making new “blood” (binding) **covenants** (cf. **Genesis 15:10-17; Jeremiah 34:17-19**)

The father initiates this major and unusual celebration. **Grace wins!**

## **(1) A Son is **Found** – “My son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found.” (15:24)**

This “resurrection” celebration is not in honor of the son; but the **father** who has been reconciled to his son; a celebration to affirm one's acceptance as a son or daughter. The prodigal was dead to the love of the father; but now he is alive. This is no small thing; and so all of heaven celebrates.

God, it would appear, is very **fond** of **sinners**. Not their sin. The father was obviously grieved over his son's decision; he neither endorsed nor overlooked his son's reckless living. But he welcomed him home.

Jesus wants us to understand that even the worst of our sins will not prevent God from loving us or stop him from longing for our return. The parable is not so much about a sinner getting saved as it is about a God who loves even those who sin against him.

## **SUMMARY**

**There is a scene in this story that deserves to be framed, it is the Father's **outstretched hands**. His tears are moving. His smile reassuring.**

**But his hands call us home.** Imagine for a moment those hands. Strong fingers. Palms wrinkled with lifelines. Stretching open like a wide gate, leaving entrance as the only option.

When Jesus told this parable, I wonder, did he use his **hands**? When he got to that point in the story, did he open his arms **wide** to illustrate the point?

Did he perceive what his audience was thinking, “*I could never go home. Not after what I did.*” Did he see the woman look at the ground or the man shake his head as if to say, “I can’t start over. I’ve made too big a mess.” Did he then open his arms even wider as if to say, “Yes. Yes, you can. You can come home.”? I don’t know. But I do know that...

**Later, he would stretch out his hands as open as he could. Later, he would force his arms open so wide they would hurt. Later, to prove that those arms would never fold, and those hands would never close, he had them nailed open. They are still open.**

**Prayer:**

*Father, we give you thanks and praise, that while we were still far off, at the edge of the village, you met us there in your son, Jesus Christ, and through your reckless extravagance, you brought us home.*

*Father, you held nothing back. Jesus was willing to spend everything for us. And we, like the younger son, deserve none of it.*

*Father, in Christ, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of Your grace that you have lavished on us. (cf. Ephesians 1:7,8).*

*In the name of Jesus our Teacher and Rabbi, Amen.*

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