

Pastor's Message – 3/27/2022
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

As I looked at the Scripture readings suggested for the day several weeks ago, I had been, in the weeks leading up to today, drawn to how God acts toward us: the promises He has made to our ancestor Abram and how He has spoken that same promise through the prophets, specifically Isaiah last week. I had heard that message and then moved on to our response – how we accept or reject God's offer of grace.

But then my focus changed. The passage we heard today, the parable of the prodigal son is one that you may have heard many times and one that many pastors have preached on. I was prepared to focus on how, although grace is offered, and even though we accept that grace and all the benefits that go with it, we can lose our salvation. Like the prodigal son, we can refuse, reject and walk away from our inheritance, losing it in the meantime.

Familiarity with a story can have two different effects. On the one hand, it might lead us to "tune it out" because we think we know it already. On the other hand, if it is told well or told in different ways, it may invite us to "tune in" more deeply and cause us to become aware of aspects of it we may have overlooked in the past.

In the story, the son is prodigal. For a Jewish son to have sunk to the level where he had to feed somebody's pigs, and that he would have been glad to eat the husks that were fed to the pigs...He had to be working for a gentile: a non-Jew – someone not like him. With unclean animals like pigs. That was lower than the belly of a snake for a Jewish lad!

The Jewish audience of Jesus' parable, by the way, would have heard this story and been scandalized.

Some older sons or some older daughters or those who have stayed with aging parents and taken on the role of care-giver for them may be tempted to take their place next to the older son in the story, "I was the one who stayed home and made the sacrifices and that no-good brother wandered away."

It's not just the older sons. It's anyone who lives by the sense that you get what you deserve. You live a responsible life and you are rewarded for it. So what's up with this miserable, lousy, wretched sod coming home, and they throw a party for him?

The story is about grace, not works. Most of us do understand it's about grace, but it's a little harder when it's "Annoying Grace" instead of "Amazing Grace."

The Parable of the Prodigal Son has been called a "perfect story." It's not because we identify with one of the three main characters, it's because we can identify with all three!" We've all been the prodigal son who fail to appreciate the blessings we have; we've all been the prodigal father who showers unconditional love on another; we've all been the prodigal older brother who resents the gifts that someone else has received in a self-righteous attitude.

I've changed my focus from where I was several weeks ago to where I am today. I've changed my focus from **our** actions and attitudes to **God's desires**.

The most striking element of the story for Jesus' original hearers might have been the image of a father running to meet his son. Men of wealth and position never ran in public and certainly never ran to someone who held a less honorable position.

Maybe some of you men in the Congregation today can understand that position of not doing something that might appear silly or less than dignified. Older men in the Middle East do not run except in an emergency. Hiking up flowing robes in order to run not only lacks dignity, it exposes legs to public view and causes dishonor and shame.

Also, the fatted calf killed at the son's return would only have been prepared for a visiting dignitary or for the wedding of one's child, both opportunities to demonstrate prestige in the community. The father discounts such honor in welcoming home the "lost" son. This father had powerful love for both the younger and the elder sons. Jesus speaks through this parable of God's love for all, both the "sinners" and the Pharisees.

“Prodigal,” which you may already know, means “recklessly extravagant or wasteful.” The son was prodigal in his spending, and the father was prodigal in giving his love, so the story could just have easily be titled “The Prodigal Father.”

This is a story about how much every person matters to God. It doesn't matter the color of a person's skin, or the gender, or the sexual orientation, or the size or age or ability. It doesn't matter if the person has made terrible mistakes. It doesn't matter if the person has squandered his fortune or “sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” in some other way. What this story teaches us is that no matter what we do, our lives matter to God our Creator.

The father in the story represents God's way of thinking and the way that Christ acts toward us. Our God is a God of extravagant mercy, unearned grace, and undeserved forgiveness. This is a story about our Prodigal Father God.

WHEN GOD RAN

Almighty God, the great I Am, Immovable Rock,
Omnipotent, Powerful, Awesome LORD, Victorious Warrior,
Commanding King of Kings, Mighty Conqueror,
and the only time, the only time I ever saw Him run
was when:

He ran to me, took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest
Said “My son's come home again.”
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in his voice, he said,
“Son, do you know I still love you?”

He caught me by surprise, when God ran.

After I left home, I knew I'd broken his heart
And I wondered then if things could ever be the same

But one night, I remembered his love for me
And down that dusty road ahead I could see
It was the only time, the only time I ever saw Him run

When He ran to me, took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest
Said "My son's come home again."
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in his voice, he said,
"Son, do you know I still love you?"

He caught me by surprise; He brought me to my knees
When God ran

I saw Him run to me.
And then I ran to Him.

I was so ashamed alone and far away,
but now I know he's been waiting for this day.

And then He ran to me, took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest
Said "My son's come home again."
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in his voice, I felt His love call me again.

He ran to me, took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest
Said "My son's come home again."
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in his voice,

He said, "Son,"
He said, "Son, My son, do you know I still love you?"

He ran to me, when God ran.

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