

Pastor's Message – 3/23/25

Matthew 25:31-46

Luke 10:29-37

Luke 15:11-32

Mothers' Day, and less so, Fathers' Day, are important holidays in our culture and in the Church, but it was impressed upon me many years ago how, for those women who did not, or could not, have children just how painful that could be for them, so I've been careful about being respectful of that.

Furthermore, not everyone has been blest and can find the image of a loving parent relatable or true to their experience. I think the song that I just sang can touch the heart of anyone who has longed for that kind of unconditional, forgiving love that the prodigal father shows to his prodigal son. Even the best earthly parent falls short of the heavenly Father that Jesus portrays in the story that Luke passes down to us.

And to make the image even more incredible is to imagine any respectable Jewish man hiking up his robes, showing his legs, and running. That was just never done.

This is just one of the parables that Jesus told about the "extravagant love and mercy of God." Picture the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears at the banquet, douses them with perfume, and then dries them with her hair. The respectable people are aghast because she is a prostitute! How dare Jesus let her touch him and yet Jesus lifts her up as an example for them all.

Most people remember Zacchaeus, "the wee little man," who climbs a sycamore tree just to get a glimpse of Jesus passing by and then Jesus invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house even though Zacchaeus is a sinner. Then Jesus forgives the thief crucified with him and promises "I assure you today, you will be with me in paradise (Lk 23:43)."

God has a special place and desire to reclaim the lost. "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it (Luke 15:4)?" And you know what happens next. Party time! "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and

search carefully until she finds it Luke 15:8)?” And then what happens? All of these stories, all of these parables, reflect the extravagant love of God.

One of the effective techniques in Bible study and reflection on Scripture is to envision oneself as one of the characters in the story: in this case, the younger son, the father, and the older brother. Reflecting on sympathize with can you sympathize or even identify with each in turn. The younger son had “struggled with selfishness, made poor decisions, taken advantage of a parent, [and] lived recklessly.” The father loves his child so much, he is ready to welcome him home despite his child’s poor choices. The older son is angry and feels unappreciated. Consider who you might be in this parable and why; try viewing the situation from the other characters’ perspectives.

I can imagine that those who are close to family find it easier to love and care for family members than others not family. After all, “blood is thicker than water.” Except, from a Christian perspective, the waters of baptism connect us in a more powerful way than family ties. God’s extravagant love and Jesus’ example of sacrificial love compels us to reach out to and care for others who are not like us.

That’s where the parable of the Good Samaritan comes in. That Samaritan is the person we could cross the street to avoid – the one with whom we have nothing in common, and the one who we never have contact with or any kind of meaningful relationships. Yet, Jesus tells a story of one who not only stopped, but sacrificed himself, put himself in danger, to help someone who he was encouraged to hate.

You know the story: the priest and the temple assistant come along and do nothing. They asked themselves, “What will happen to me if I stop to help this man?” It’s a legitimate question, but the Good Samaritan asked himself, “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” The compassion Jesus calls his followers to show compels us to ask the Good Samaritan’s question when we see or know about people who are suffering. Jesus’ parables set an example of doing good – of good works.

We much prefer the idea of grace: free, undeserved, unconditional grace that reveals God's extravagant love for. It's the grace that we do nothing for and the grace that suggests that God's love is so extravagant that everyone goes to heaven, and no one goes to hell.

So, what do we make of the parable in our first reading today? "This parable, taken at face value, teaches that the sole criterion for salvation is our works, specifically how we cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, sick, and the imprisoned." There's a theological dilemma here that stands against Jesus' other parables. It makes no reference to God's grace, Christ's atoning death, or justification by faith. And then Paul writes to the Romans and to us, "There is no one righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10); ... "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)."

The genius of Jesus' use of these kinds of parables is that they force hearers to engage with the parable, to think about and ponder their meaning. The genius of Jesus' parables forces us to think about what is and about what should be.

The early part of our worship series and our Bible study during this year's season of Lent turned our attention to Jesus' first sermon and his announcement that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near and is now among us. Jesus' parables that we hear today provoke us to wonder how that Kingdom is present in the here and now and what part we play in the once, present, and future Kingdom of God. Taking the values spoken in Jesus' parable make the Kingdom come alive around us and in us. Life in the Kingdom; Jesus' parables are what it looks like.