

Parables of Jesus: The Prodigal Son
Luke 15:1-2, 11-24
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This story may be the most famous of all the stories Jesus told. George Murray called this story “the most divinely tender and most humanly touching story ever told on our earth.” George Buttrick wrote, “No story more instantly touches the nerve of actual life. Let it be read, without comment or explanation, and it conquers us” (Dunnam, pg 113).

I know for me, that this story, more than any other story, describes my spiritual journey. And for me, it is also the description of God that I identify with the best. So let’s take a look at the ways that this story reflects who we are, and what it tells us about the heart of God.

As we get started, I’d like to invite you to take the white insert out of your program.....

This is the second week in a series that are all based on the parables of Jesus. Last week we talked about the Kingdom of God being like a treasure or a pearl of great value....that when we know the real value of this treasure, it is worth giving our all to it.

We also mentioned what a parable is...that it is story or comparison that is meant to illustrate something else. So Jesus would take something like the Kingdom of God, which is a multi-faceted concept, and he’d compare it to a buried treasure, or a little mustard seed. Jesus would use everyday, accessible things that everyone could understand. Like a woman who lost a coin and searches for it. So with these stories, he would be saying that “this” is like “this”.

Context is always important when you read scripture, and that is also true with the parables. Jesus told the stories for a reason, and the issue or subject that the parable describes is usually found in the context before the story.

Like in today’s very famous story, did you catch why Jesus told this story in the first place? Well let’s take a look at it:

Insert Luke 15:1-2. Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them...”

He was being criticized by the religious leaders and the good people of the Jewish society. They did not understand why he would spend his time with the sinners and tax collectors. Why did he waste his time among the people who made bad decisions in life, with people who seemed to have no interest in God? Why not spend his time with the good people who have already demonstrated their desire to know God?

Now here’s the set up. The Pharisees work very hard in their life to obey the laws of Moses and be righteous, because it is their understanding that God cannot tolerate sin and does not want to be associated with or tolerant of sin in any way. Their name, the word “Pharisee”, means “separated from”, meaning that they, like God were separated from sin.

So here’s Jesus, a rabbi, who comes along, and instead of staying pure and separated from those who are known to be sinners, he associates with them. The Pharisees don’t understand this...it boggles their mind. So they grumble about it.

And in response to this question, Jesus tells three stories about something that gets lost; the story of a shepherd who loses one sheep and leaves the rest of the flock behind to go find the one; and story of a woman who loses a coin and searches everywhere, tearing her house apart, to find it.; and this story. In every story, when the lost thing is found, there is a celebration; there’s a party. Almost everyone who hears these stories can relate to them. And remember, listening to this story are the Pharisees and scribes on the one side, and the sinners on the other. And there is a message for both groups. The sinners are like the younger son in the story, and the Pharisees are like the older son in the story (and we’ll deal with the older son in a couple of weeks- not going to get into his response to the father today).

So there is a different message for each group about how God loves them. And Jesus really wants the Pharisees to understand that God loves the sinners also and really wants them to come home to his love, so twice in this one chapter, Jesus makes the statement that the heavenly party level intensifies greatly when some sinner that was lost comes home to God's forgiveness and love.

This story, maybe more than any other story, drives the mission of Saint Paul's. We have a heart at this church for people who are disconnected from God. Inside of our mission to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ is a strong focus on people who do not know God's love; people who have been burned and put off by some church experience; people who need to know how much God loves them.

This desire shows up in one of our core values (something we teach in the SPE course), which is that we believe that people, all people, matter to God. Good life-decisions or bad life-decisions; high income – no income; coat and tie or t-shirt and jeans. Already a Christian – not yet a Christian; They all matter to God, and if they matter to God, they better matter to us. So we pray that we would have eyes to see and value people as God sees and values people. And we get this value because of Jesus' response to his critics, found in these three stories in Luke 15.

This third story, the one we heard at the introduction, is called the parable of the Prodigal Son. What does the word "prodigal" mean? It means someone who is recklessly spends their money, one who is wasteful. The word "prodigal" comes from the root word "prodigious" which means large or lavish. The younger son in this story wasted lavish amounts, or what he wasted, he wasted lavishly – in large living.

Now what I'd like to do is walk through the story a scene at a time...

The first scene is **The desire for unbridled freedom**. Part of the genius of this story is that we can all relate to it. We have all at some time been a prodigal in some way. Sometimes we still are like the prodigal in some way. All of us have known somebody who is or was a prodigal. We can relate to this younger son. I know I can.

I couldn't wait to get away from the rules and expectations of my parents and live the way I wanted to live. I was in such a hurry for that. I remember the summer before my senior year, I was still just 16, we moved from a small town into suburban St. Louis. I had a college write me a letter that summer and they invited me to early enrollment on their campus...which meant skipping my last year of high school and starting dorm life on a college campus that fall. I'm like, "Mom, Dad, I want to do this!"

My mom and dad agreed to it, but they were nervous! Because they knew something that I now know, and that you all know...16 is way too young for unrestrained freedom. You remember that time in life, right? Some of you out there are in this stage right now. We didn't want our parents to restrict our freedoms...we argued with them, we disobeyed them (and I don't know about you, but I never got away with it), we rebelled. What I wanted was to be free of the restrictions and the responsibilities of being in my parent's house. I did not want my parents to control me. I wanted to do what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. They usually didn't like what I wanted to do or when I wanted to do it. I did not like having a curfew. I did not like having to call home and tell my mom where I was and what I was doing. I didn't like the chores or any of the rules at home – I wanted unrestrained freedom!

I wanted to be myself, not Jerry's son or Betty's son. I was ready to get out of that house as soon as possible. So I got my chance at 16, and I took it! So I can relate to the younger son. And like the younger son, I wanted to experience all the things in life that were supposed to bring me pleasure.

Now in this story, as the younger son is pursuing unrestrained freedom and pleasure, the son says, "I want my inheritance, dad, and I want it now." Let me just say that freedom is a good thing. The scripture says, "for freedom, Christ has set us free." Freedom is a good thing when it is yoked to or coupled with God and God's purposes in life. Pleasure is also good. Pleasure is something God wants us to experience in life, but when pleasure and unrestricted freedom are

become the primary pursuit of our lives, there are going to be problems. Life is going to unravel. They are meant to be a part of life, but not the focus of life.

So the son says, “give me my inheritance. And I’m going to get out here. I’m going to go to a distant place, and I’m going to do what I want to do. And you won’t be there to tell me what I can and can’t do. And I’m going to have fun, and do the things that will make me happy. And you can give me my inheritance or not, but I’m out of here.”

The son’s inappropriate question.

Now we all have an inkling that the son’s request is out of line. And here’s why. The only real security anyone could have was the possession of land. Land was limited in Israel and it’s value was high. Land was passed down through generations because it was so valuable and because it was the source of security and living for the older generations. When father gifted his land to his children, it was intended in the law that the children would take care of the father and mother’s needs from the land. So the younger son was not just asking for the deed, he was asking his father to sacrifice the security of the provisions he would gain from that land in his old age, because the son’s intent was to sell it!

The son was also saying that he was not going to be there to help provide for the father in his older years. Some people have said that the son’s request would be similar to saying, “You’re as good as dead to me” to the father.

In Jewish law, when the land is divided among the children, the first born male received a double portion. So in this case there are two sons, so the land would be divided into thirds and the younger son would only have claim to one-third of his father’s land. And the son quickly liquidates the assets and sets out for a distant land – far from the watchful eye of his father.

And we learn from the story, that he squanders all his money on prostitutes and lavish, wasteful, pleasure-seeking living. This is what he does with the family inheritance. Until it’s all gone. In his lust for life where he was king, where he called the shots, with unrestrained freedom and pursuit of pleasure, he moved further and further away from being his father’s child to being someone or something else’s slave.

From freedom to slavery.

This is the way it is with sin. We are like the younger son in our sin too. You know how sheep get lost...they nibble themselves lost. Heads are down, nibbling away, they see a little grass over there that looks greener and so on and so on, until they look up and they are no longer near the heard. They’re lost and alone, and they are open and vulnerable to predators. This is how sin works in us, too. We set our sights on things that are not meant to be the focus for life and we pursue it until we see something else and we chase it for awhile, and pretty soon we have wondered pretty far from home, from the God who loves and us and wants to have a relationship with us.

What happened to the son, and what sometimes happens to us, is that he become a slave to what he pursued... unrestricted freedom and pleasure, and in the end it ruined him. He spent all he had on it. And when the money ran out, he discovered the prison he had built for himself. Now for us, maybe we didn’t pursue unbridled freedom, but we pursued something else, and that something else ended up owning us. Need for prestige or power, or wealth. Maybe it was another addiction that step by step took over our lives; pornography, alcohol, career, something. Maybe it is a desire to have more stuff than you can afford and step by step you’re in deeper in debt until you’re a slave to it. Truth is that we are prone to sin and wonder. Prone to leave the God I love. That’s the way an old hymn of the church puts it. There is a part of the prodigal that lives in us. That’s what happens when we focus on something that is not meant to be the central focus for our life. And today’s a good time to recognize it and do something about it. Maybe today’s a good day for you to come home.

Hitting bottom and conversion.

Now in the story, things go from bad to worse for the boy and he hits bottom. He’s run out of money, and then there’s a depression, a famine in the land. So he takes a job as a hired hand on a pig farm. Now when he was in school, as all good Jewish children are, when he was learning

the Torah, first five books of the OT by heart, he learned that pigs were the most unclean of all animals! So when his teacher asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, hog farming was not the answer. But there he was, and the story tells us that he was so destitute that even the pig slop looked good to him. And no one will help him. He's hit bottom.

It's interesting how hardship works in our life, isn't it. I mean sometimes hardships come in life, bad things happen in life, and it's because we're doing the right thing. This happened a lot to the early church. The right thing for them to do was to share that Jesus was crucified and resurrected, yet this led to persecution and other hardships. Sometimes hardship and bad things come in life and there is no reason, it is just part of life. There is no fault, no one to blame, no one that did anything wrong. But sometimes, bad things happen, hardships come because of the decisions we make. It is part of the discipline of God that is experiencing the consequences of the life we have chosen. God's intention for these consequences is to try to get our attention and wake us up to the damage that our sin, our choices, are doing to us and to others. In those cases, the hardship is really a gift...a gift that God hopes will lead us to repentance...to go home.

So this hardship comes to the son as a natural consequence to his decisions. And this hardship brings humility, and it gives him a new perspective and the story tells us that he came to himself. When he came to his senses, he saw his path. And this path was to give up the very thing that he started out pursuing. He said to himself, "I will go back to my father, and I will admit my sin, and I will tell him I am no longer worthy to be called his son, and I will ask to be one of his hired hands." When he comes to his senses, he figures out that it is better to go back to his father as a servant, giving up his freedom, than it is to keep his unbridled freedom and feed pigs.

I love that about this story, he came to himself. He came to his senses. Have you come to your senses? Or are you living in a daze. Do you see the world as it really is, or only as our culture around us says that it is? Have you been nibbling your way further and further from God? Maybe you sense that something is really wrong in life and you wonder to yourself, "how did it happen like this?" Is there a hardship in your life that is the making of your own sin, your own decisions, that is meant to wake you up?

The response for us who share any part of the prodigal son's story in our life is the same as the response of the son. For all those sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors who were listening to this story, Jesus is saying, "Now listen, this is the way it works. When you finally come to your senses, and you realize that you need to come to a right relationship with your father, then you apologize, and you repent, turn back to him. And that's all it takes! And he'll take you back. He'll welcome you home.

Going home.

I think Jesus wants us to catch a truth here that the son did not realize until this point of the story. The younger son not only realizes that he is lost, but he also knows where home is. Did you catch that? He realizes where home is. Home is where his father is. This is also part of coming to his senses, and this is part of the message for us. It didn't really matter how far away he went, how long he was gone, what he was doing. Home was always where his father was. And this is something we are meant to catch in this story.

Your home is always going to be with God. You may have wandered away, may still be wandering. Doesn't matter where you've been, how long you've been gone, or what you've been doing. You may not even believe in God, but Jesus wants you to know that your home is with God. Your soul will never know the peace, assurance, and confidence of being home anyplace else – only in your Father's arms.

The Father's Response

Let's look now at the central focus of this story...one of the most powerful pictures of God in all of scripture is right here. As we mentioned earlier, there are two segments of people listening to the story, and it is at this moment that Jesus is really addressing the Pharisees, the ones who are criticizing him for associating with sinners. They think Jesus is being easy on sin because he associates with them. It's as if Jesus is asking the Pharisees, "What do you really think God is like? You're the experts in the law...do you really think that God is so holy, so put off by our sin,

that God would have nothing to do with these people? Do you really believe that God would turn his back on them?"

What's your picture of God? Is God an angry rule keeper ready to strike you with an affliction because you made a mistake or a bad choice? Do you think God has given up on you because you've made such a mess of your life?

And then he shows them what God is really like. This is the character of God right here...

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him...

The father was keeping watch...he did not give up on his child. He would watch the road and pray that maybe today will be the day. God does not give up on us.

and was filled with compassion;....he had compassion. Not anger, not resentment, not bitterness, not a desire for vengeance, but he was filled with compassion. ...**he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him....**This is before the son even has the chance to say a word. The Father didn't stand there, tapping his foot and waiting... He reached out to demonstrate his love before anything else took place. He created a safe place for the son to say what he needed to say. This is the character of God. **Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."** And before the son could finish what he was going to say, **the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.**

Do you hear the joy! The father chose to live in the joy of the moment and not relive the hurt, disappointment or anger of the past. Instead of keeping him at arm's length, he reaches out for him and grabs him. Do you feel the intense love and forgiveness and joy that his son has come home? That's the way God looks at us...with compassion and a longing for us to come home...with love, forgiveness and joy! This is the heart of the father, this is the heart of God.

There's a wonderful story that Philip Yancey tells in his book, What's so amazing about Grace? In this story, there was a young girl from Traverse City, MI and as a teenager around 14 years old, she ran away from home. She went to Detroit to find herself and find life on her terms of unbridled freedom and access to pleasure. When she got to Detroit, there were not many jobs for 14 yr old girls with no place to live and no support systems. Well there was one job, and it actually paid pretty well. She ended up working the streets for a man, who made sure that she had lots of customers.

Her parents didn't know where she was. She does this job for a couple of years until she becomes sick. When she becomes sick, she is no longer useful as an employee in this business, and her handler cuts her loose. Now she's a sick little girl on the streets of Detroit. She's asleep one night in an alley, covered up with cardboard and newspaper, and while she shivers through the night, she has a dream of Traverse City in the springtime, and the cherry blossoms blooming. And she wonders if her parents will take her home.

The next morning she finds a phone and she calls three times, but there was no answer. The last time she leaves a message on the machine. She says, "Mom, Dad, I was wondering, can I come home? I'm going to catch the bus tonight, and I'm going to make my way back to Traverse City and if you'll let me come home, will you meet me at the bus station? And if I don't see you there, I'll just stay on the bus and keep going until I get to Canada."

She takes the ride up, and the closer she gets to home, the more nervous and fearful she gets that her parents are not going to show up. She's memorized the apology she is going to make to her mom and dad. She gets off the bus, terrified, and she walks into the bus station at midnight, and she's greeted by 40 of her family members. Sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles and cousins, and grandparents. They are all wearing goofy hats and they're blowing party horns, and they have a banner sign that says "welcome home". And then she sees her dad. And her dad walks up to her and reaches out to her and she starts to apologize – "Dad I'm so sorry..." And he hushes her. And he holds her in his arms.

And that is what God is like! If you're here today and you are a prodigal and you've been wondering, then this is the perfect time for you to come back home. It's the perfect time to turn to God and say, "God I'm sorry, I want to come home!"

And for the rest of us who've come home...who've found home in God's love, I want to say this. It's part of our mission as the church to help people find their way home. And it's our job to be like those sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles, who like the father, are choosing to live in the joy of a sister who's come home instead of the seat of judgment, resentment or anger. Our job is to put on the goofy hats, blow the party horns in celebration, and hold up the banners that say, "welcome home." Welcome home!

Prayer:

There may be some of us here today that are thinking that this story is for you today. Maybe you're saying, "I've been wondering away from you Lord, and I want to come home. Today is the day...I want to come home." Just do like the son in the story and turn your life back to God and say, "I'm sorry, Lord. I just want to come home to you and let you lead my life."

You know God's response – Put up the banners, break out the goofy hats and party horns – because my child was dead and is alive; was lost and is found; welcome home! Let's celebrate!

And for the rest of us...Lord. Sometimes the longer we are Christians, the more we forget what it was like to be a prodigal. Help us, Lord, and use us to point prodigals back home – to help them find your love as they see it in us; to cheer them on and encourage them and invite them; to welcome them with joy that they too have found their home in you.

Don't let us get filled with resentment or anger or aloofness that comes from thinking we're better than anyone else, but help us to live in the joy of your love and your forgiveness for us and everyone else too.