

We'll Leave the Light on for You - The Rebel Son and the Running Father

This morning we I am finishing up where Pastor Mark left of Last week looking at the story of the Lost Son, or the Prodigal Son. Last week, Mark talked about how we leave lights on as sign that we are expecting someone. It is a sign of welcome. One of my favorite lights that is left on comes from my childhood. Every Halloween kids dress up in all sorts of costumes and canvass the neighborhoods in search of one thing...candy. And we parents have a tradition so that those kids know where the candy is...we leave the front porch lights on. Yes, I loved seeing that light left on for me.

So, we are finishing up this series today. But first I want to go back and read some of this story again to you to refresh of where we are today. ***“There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.***

“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. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“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! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ 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.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.” Luke 15:11-24

Last week, Mark looked into the story of the Older son, the Rule-Keeper son. Today, I want to finish up by looking at the younger son, the rebel son and the father. Remember last week, Mark explained how there were certain kinds of people listening to Jesus when he told this story. The Pharisees listening would really have been challenged by the image of the older son in this story, and the Sinners would certainly identify with the younger son, the rebel son here.

Jesus begins the story, "There was a man who had two sons." The main thing you need to know about the man is how much he loved those boys. So much so much so that everything he had he had given to them. And these two boys and their father were part of a village, and the people in that village thought they had seen love before. But never has a father loved his children like this man loved those two boys from the moment they were born. He was wise, and he was patient, and he was firm, and he was gentle. He was honest, and mostly he was just utterly devoted to them. They broke his heart. Both religious Pharisee and Sinner...They broke his heart.

Now they did it in really different ways. Jesus is telling this to people who have broken God's heart in different ways. And that is how this story is our story. We've all broken God's heart in some way...in different ways.

In this story, there is a younger child, and as is often the case, the kid is a free spirit. He is a party waiting to happen. He loves the limelight. He likes it when people pay attention to him. He can light up a room when he wants to be charming. But to tell the truth, he is kind of spoiled. He is kind of immature. He kind of is entitled, kind of impulsive. He is pretty good at getting what he wants.

One day, the younger son shatters the family. "Old man, I'm tired of waiting around for you to die so let's just pretend like you're dead now and give me everything today."

Jesus goes on to say, "Not many days after that, the son gathered all he had." Here is the idea. This is a family with servants and cattle. In that day, they have considerable resources, and it's going to take some time for the father to honor the son's request. He has to liquidate his assets, sell off possessions and livestock and so. While that's going on, see, that means there is time for the whole village to know what's taking place. This is the topic of conversation for everybody. This is a big deal when a son does this to his father. This is unprecedented.

Ken Bailey, author of *The Cross & the Prodigal*, writes about a first century Jewish custom we'll come back to in just a moment. If a Jewish boy takes his inheritance and loses it among the Gentiles so the Gentiles end up with all the resources that had been a part of Israel, and then that boy dares to try to come home, there was actually a ceremony invoked to indicate to that kid he is cut off from his family and his village.

So for several days, this is such a weighty deal. The father keeps wondering while he is liquidating his assets, *Will*

my boy come to his senses? Will he change his mind? Will I get him back? But he won't. The day cannot come soon enough for this boy. When that check is ready, he walks out of that gate. He shakes the dust of that little town off of his feet, and he cannot leave fast enough. He never looks back.

He goes to a distant country. Everything that looks good, that looks shiny and bright and self-indulgent and desirable and pleasurable and satisfying is his...until the money runs out. Then a famine hits. Not just a famine. Jesus says, "A great famine." There is a little story behind this.

In that day, when a great famine struck, there was no outside communication, no internet, not 24 hour news, no telethons to raise money for a good cause, no way for a world to know what's going on there and no transportation system to easily get there if they did. No hope. So a great famine meant (and there are accounts of this kind of thing in the ancient world) murder, thievery, bodies left outside to rot in the street, children being sold into slavery, cannibalism. Jesus' listeners knew of such things.

The point behind this is even when this is going on, that boy does not want to go home. Does not do it until he is at the brink of death. Why not? Because he knows what's waiting for him if he does.

When a Jewish boy squandered his inheritance among the Gentiles, if he dared to try to return home, the entire community would gather upon his return. As a symbol of how destructive he had been, how he had broken his relationship with that community, broken his family, broken his father, it was a very visual culture, very dramatic gesture. You think about this. The entire community would gather together. When that boy tried to come home, they would take a pot as a symbol of his life. They would break it before him.

This is a way of saying, "This is the brokenness that you have caused in our community. You have broken everything that is good. You have broken trust. You have broken community. Worse, you have broken the heart of your father. Your damage is beyond repair. So let this be a symbol of your brokenness. Let these be the broken pieces of your broken life. You are not whole. You are not welcome. You are not family.

You are cut off." In fact, they called this ceremony the **kezazah**, which is Hebrew for *the cutting off*. You are kezazah. Some of us have felt this kind of brokenness.

Well, the boy knows what's waiting for him if he tries to come home. That's why he stays away even when there is so much pain, even when there is not just a famine...a *great* famine. But finally he says to himself, *Even this is better than dying*. So he decides to return. He makes up a little speech. He sees the village. He braces himself. He knows what's coming. But there is one thing he had not counted on. At the gate in his home stands an old, heartbroken man, leaving the light on. He is looking over the horizon as he does every day, hoping against hope. On this day he sees what he has been looking for way far away.

You know, the way somebody walks is a really distinct thing. Do you ever notice that? If you know somebody really well, even from behind you can tell them just by their gait. This old man saw that body take its very first step. He knows that walk. He knows that boy. Jesus says, "**While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son...**" Now when Jesus tells this part of the story to that group of people listening to Him, to those sinners there, some of them start to cry because He is saying something wonderful about God.

The father ran. Luke chooses a technical term to describe what the father did. It was normally reserved for athletic contests. Literally the idea would be the father *raced*. The father sprinted. Now in the Middle East, the patriarch of a family, a man of great dignity and great authority, a man dressed in elaborate, ornate robes, always walks in a slow, dignified fashion. Never runs.

Dignified men never run...right? Did you really ever see John Wayne run? Or Marlon Brando, the Godfather, or any other strong male main characters in the movies? Strong, in control men don't run. For this father to run would mean he would have to gather up the edges of his robe so he didn't trip over them if he was really going to run, let alone sprint. That would mean he would be displaying, showing his legs, his naked legs in public. That was not done. That was shameful. That was humiliating. A little boy might do that. A slave on the bottom rung might do that. No father would run. This father runs.

Why would he do this? He can't stop thinking about his broken boy. *If the village gets to my boy first, he thinks, it will mean kezazah. It will mean brokenness. It will mean shame. It will mean humiliation, and that might do him in. That might crush his heart. That might crush his spirit. I might lose him forever. I can't let that happen. I have to get to him before anyone else does. I have to be the first one to my boy.* That father picks up his robes, and he starts running. People listening to Jesus' story, would see that the father, filled with compassion, takes on the humiliation that should by all rights have fallen on that prodigal boy. Lets it all fall on himself.

All the twists of this remarkable story that has amazed the human race for 2,000 years, this is the one that's most unexpected. This father does what no father would do back then. This father runs because that father never stopped loving that boy, no matter how far that boy went from home. That boy never stopped needing his father, no matter how far he ran away. See, this is not the parable of the prodigal son. This is not the parable of the resentful older brother. This is the parable of the father who runs. It's the story of the running father.

God is so filled with compassion for you whatever distant country you have been in that when you take one step toward Him, He picks up His robes. He bares His legs. He humiliates Himself. He comes sprinting to you. See this is what He was doing in Jesus. Jesus is God running to His rebellious child, to me and you.

The father gets to his boy, and the boy starts into his speech about he is going to try the earning plan. He will try to earn his way back into the family. His father just shuts him up, throws his arms around his boy, embraces him, kisses him over and over and says, "Bring out my best robe and my most expensive ring and my finest shoes. Kill the fatted calf. There will be no kezazah. Brokenness does not get the last word. Not for my boy. There will be music, and there will be dancing, and there will be feasting. There will be a party because my son was lost and now he is found. My son was dead, and now he is alive."

You know, a lot of times when we gather, we talk about different aspects of Scripture, how to understand God or life or faith. This is as simple a message as I know how to make it. This is just about coming home, because the light is still left on for you. Will you come home? Maybe you have been in a really far country and made really bad choices. You have been selfish. You have slept around. You have cheated or stolen. Maybe you've committed crimes. Been through an ugly divorce, or more than one. Ripped off innocent people. Been involved in a lifestyle that you think would make everybody in this room blush. You can come home.

You don't have to. You can choose to stay in a far country. Sometimes people go to church sometimes for years, but they're involved in a secret life, a hidden life, that's just crushing others, just killing them. They get just trapped in it, and they want people to keep thinking well about them, so nobody knows. You don't have to. You can come home. Maybe you're kind of like that older brother, and on the outside, things look okay. But the truth is, in your heart, there is just all this anger, pride, resentment, and coldness toward God. You can come home.

So often people think they're stuck with the earning plan. They think, *I have to clean my act up first. I have to impress God with some good intentions or good works or good deeds or some kind of track record.* No. You just come home by the grace of the Father because He is the God who runs. Jesus died in our place, paid for our sin. Nobody earns their way home. You just come.

Philip Yancey wrote a book called *What's So Amazing About Grace?* In a chapter called "The Lovesick Father," he retells this story in a way that just wrecked me the first time I read it, so I thought I would adapt it for us today.

A young girl grows up on a soybean farm outside Decatur, Illinois. Her parents do not much care for the music she listens to or the clothes she wears or her nose ring. She does not much care for their values or their church. They have another argument. She locks herself in her room. When her dad knocks on the door, she screams, "I hate you!" She decides to run away. She decides to run away to California. She decides to run to San Francisco.

When she gets there, she is much lonelier than she had anticipated, but she soon meets a man who drives the biggest car she has ever seen. He gives her a ride. He buys her lunch. He shows her the city. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she has ever felt, and she wanted to feel good really bad. She realizes how much life and fun her parents have been robbing her of. This good life goes on for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car (she calls him "Boss") teaches her a few things about what men like. It's a side of life that she never knew in Decatur, Illinois. The parties and the penthouses and the gifts and the glamour are like being in another world for her.

After a year, the first signs of illness appear. It amazes her how quickly the boss turns mean. Before she knows it, he turns her out on the street. No money; no clothes; no car; no parties. She is alone. She uses what she knows on the streets to get whatever money she can, but she looks gaunt and thin. The men she is with now are no longer wealthy and generous, and sometimes they're dangerous and cruel. All her money goes to support her habit. She eats whatever she can find. She sleeps on a metal grate or a park bench.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything around her looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She is a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. Her pockets are empty. Her clothes are rags. Her stomach is hungry. She needs a fix. Her eyes are filled with tears. Then her mind flashes on a single image...her home in Decatur, Illinois, when summer comes, and the fields are so green you can hardly take all that life in. "Oh God, why did I leave? My dog at home eats better than I do now." She is sobbing, and she knows that more than ever she has wanted anything in her life, she wants to go home.

Three straight calls. Three straight connections with the answering machine. Twice she hangs up without leaving a message. The third time she says, "Dad, mom, it's me. I was wondering about coming home. I'm going to be on a bus. It will pass through sometime around midnight on Tuesday. If you're not there, I'll just keep on going to New York. Just wanted you to know."

The whole time on the bus, she can't turn off the questions. She wonders if they even got the message. She wishes she'd given them more warning. She wonders if they've given her up for dead. She keeps thinking about what she is going to say to her father. She keeps rehearsing this little speech in her mind. "Dad, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know it was my fault, not yours. Can you forgive me?" She hasn't apologized for anything for years.

The bus pulls into the station, and the driver says, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all the time we have." Fifteen

minutes to decide her life. She looks in her little compact mirror, tries to brush her hair and get the lipstick marks off her teeth. She sees the needle marks in her arms and wonders if her parents will notice...if they're there. She walks into that bus terminal at one o'clock in the morning in Decatur, Illinois.

She has imagined a thousand different scenes in her mind, but not one of them prepares her for what she sees because there inside those concrete walls around those plastic chairs, in that bus terminal in Decatur, Illinois, stands a group of 40 brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents and one dog. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing kazoos and cheering for her as if she were a hero coming home from a war. There is a giant hand-painted sign saying, "Welcome home" taped all the way across the back wall.

Standing in front of that crowd with a tear-stained face and a trembling smile is the father whom she told she hated the last time she saw him. She can't bring herself to look him in the face as she starts her little speech. "Dad, I'm so sorry. It's my fault."

He puts his hands on her face, and he raises her eyes up to him. He begins to laugh and cry so hard his whole body shakes. "I know," he says. What he used to say to her when she would cry when she was a tiny little baby, "I know, I know, I know. No need for another word. You'll miss the party. We have to have a party." He takes that body in his arms and brings her home.

The amazing application for our own lives is crystal clear. Our heavenly Father has taken our shame through his Son, Jesus, who willingly endured the cross on our behalf. He took our sins' shame so that we would not have to. As a result, we can be forgiven, restored — accepted. We do not have to fear going home to our Father and confessing our sins, no matter what we have done, or how many times we have done it.

In the parable, only the father could restore the son to full sonship in the family. In our case, we are sinners, and it is not by our hard work that we are restored with the Holy God of the Universe. He calls us and waits, he leaves the light on for us — and when he sees a single repentant step in his direction, he is off and running to welcome us back home!

Not only does God forgive us, but he takes upon himself our shame. He lifts off that weight that we carry on our shoulders for our past mistakes, and willingly wipes the slate clean once more. Today, may we experience what the prodigal son encountered upon returning to the 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"*** (Luke 15:20).

"We'll Leave the Light On for You" is originally a message series created by John and Nancy Ortberg from Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. I am very grateful for their insightful work which has inspired our version of this series here at Saint Paul's UMC, Joplin, MO.