

"The Parable of the Waiting Father"

Luke 15:11-32

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When I look back over my life, I don't have to think very hard to come up with some important role-models for my life. Naturally, the first that comes to mind would have to be my own father- Howard Leslie Wood. And though he died close to a half-century ago, dying at the relatively young age of 57, there isn't a day goes by that I don't wake up and find myself reminded of him. He wasn't a perfect dad by any means, but he had a very tender heart and he loved his wife and children as much as any man could. I'll always remember him as a good, fair, honest, hard-working, and above all, much-loving father, and I pray that over the years, I've been able to emulate many of those SAME qualities in my OWN life.

But a SECOND great role-model can be traced to our New Testament lesson this morning, in Jesus's parable of the Prodigal Son. The purpose of the parable was to inform his followers of the nature of their Heavenly Father, that as this father's love for his children never wavered even when their hearts were far away, neither does the love of God ever change or diminish toward US, his OWN children. The late Dr. Kenneth Bailey, was one of the Presbyterian Church's most distinguished biblical scholars and he wrote of the ways in which Jesus revealed his Heavenly Father through this parable. He said that there are at least four different places in it where Jesus's description of the father deviated from Middle Eastern custom to give us a truly extraordinary picture of a father's deep love.

FIRST, when the younger son asks for his inheritance, it represented a rejection of his father and his home, that he was in effect saying, "Dad, why don't you just drop dead!" It was a direct repudiation of his father's authority because, in actuality, such a request was just UNTHINKABLE. Any self-respecting Middle Eastern father would have driven the boy out of the house with a sharp slap across the face with the back of his hand as Middle Eastern culture would have DEMANDED it. It was nothing less than a deep and unforgivable insult to the father.

Yet, to the AMAZEMENT of the Middle Eastern listener, the father in the story does what no Middle Eastern father would EVER do- he grants the request. From that point on, the father endures the agony of rejected love- the deepest pain one can experience. FURTHERMORE, by granting the request, the father offers his son ULTIMATE FREEDOM- the freedom to reject the love that he offers. He seems to understand that if there is a risk in placing such a large responsibility in the hands of someone so young, there is an even GREATER risk by withholding the inheritance TOO LONG and never developing within that son or daughter the sense that he or she COULD be trusted.

This leads us to Dr. Bailey's SECOND point: the son then asserts the right to sell. Modern scholarship has determined that where it says "he gathered all he had" is better translated, "the younger son turned the whole of his share into cash." First century Jewish law specified that a father may make an oral will and formally divide his estate, but it takes effect only after the father DIES; in the meantime, neither the owner nor the heirs can sell the assets. However, in the parable, the father lets the boy DO it. Thus we see that this father does the

OPPOSITE of those who sport that bumper sticker on the back of their vans- "I'm spending my kid's inheritance"- instead, he gives him HIS share while he's yet ALIVE. He demonstrates in every sense of the word exactly what he told his OLDER son, "Everything I have is ALREADY yours."

The THIRD extraordinary example of love on the father's part occurs upon the young son's return. Verse 20 reads, "But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." Day after day, there wasn't a single minute in which one eye wasn't focused at the end of that long driveway in anxious expectancy of his son's return. As he told his elder son, "Son, you are always with me," so is the YOUNGER son "always with him" because he never stopped loving him and holding his arms out to him. What an extraordinary sight is provided us in this narrative when before the prodigal even arrives at the beginning of the long driveway, the father has ALREADY ordered the wardrobe that he had waiting just for that moment to be brought out and the coronation to begin. The outfit chosen for his younger son had ALREADY been cleaned and pressed and lay in wait for the long-anticipated moment of his return, REGARDLESS of his son's condition or to what extent he had dishonored himself- such was the father's love.

While the son slowly HOBBLER to the entrance of the driveway, the father RACES to meet his son as it seems he can't get to him FAST enough. This is unprecedented as NEVER, according to Middle East customs, does a father run to his son, but it is always the OTHER way around. Robes in New Testament times reached to the ground and to run would get them dirty as well as run the risk of falling down and ruining them. In addition, a gentleman was known by his walk, practices that persist even today. Muslim and Christian religious figures can be seen moving through the city with the slow, stately pace of the classical dignified gentleman. But no, in the parable the father runs down the street and thereby offers a demonstration of unconditional love, despite the mockery and humiliation he was inviting for himself! You see, nothing could contain his joy in this supreme moment.

And the FOURTH great demonstration of love that violated Middle Eastern custom occurs between the father and his OTHER son. When the elder brother returns from the field, he hears the music and festivity and to his horror learns that it is a celebration over the return of his younger brother. When the father goes out to entreat him to come in, his son refuses to enter the banquet hall where the rest of his father's guests are assembled. Such a refusal was a sharp rebuke to his father. Here the entire village is watching and listening. The insulted father is expected to go out and thrash the boy. Instead, the father patiently addresses his older son with the tender word "teknon" meaning "my beloved son." You see, NOTHING could change the deep feeling he had for his children. Hence, we are presented with four different instances where Christ's picture of the father in his parable reacts in a completely unexpected manner, where he portrays him as tirelessly patient and loving and unselfish, ruled not by the conventions of custom and culture but by the tenderness of his heart.

Now when I began this series, I said that there were actually THREE separate dramas rolled into one here. First we looked at the YOUNGER son and saw how willful, foolish, indulgent and self-centered he was. He had insulted his father by prematurely requesting his share of his inheritance. THEN, to cap it all off, he squandered it all in a distant land before returning home- tired, humiliated, sick, and broke. He's a pretty good candidate for the title "prodigal," isn't he? Then we investigated the OLDER son and saw how one could remain

outwardly dutiful and obedient while inwardly being envious, resentful, and judgmental. Throughout his ministry, we see how Jesus regarded the twin sins of pride and self-righteousness to be every bit as destructive and even MORE SO than one's sins of the flesh. Thus, the OLDER boy, who represents the Pharisees and scribes whom Jesus was addressing, could ALSO be nominated as the rogue in the story.

Now this parable is universally regarded as “the Parable of the Prodigal Son,” although the word “prodigal” never appears in the story. If you pick up a dictionary, you will find that a “prodigal” is defined as “a wasteful person,” “a spendthrift,” “someone who is overly extravagant and excessive”- the very OPPOSITE of someone who is miserly, stingy, and close-fisted. Well if a prodigal is someone who is reckless with his possessions, someone who is overly lavish and profuse to the point of wasting them, are we not then describing the person in this story that might NOT be the younger son nor even the OLDER brother AFTER ALL. Rather, it just might be the third and only character of the story who is LEFT- the FATHER, that HE might be the REAL spendthrift, the one who conducts himself most carelessly and irresponsibly in this tale. Perhaps the younger son has been libeled all these years and the title of this account should ACTUALLY be the parable of the “prodigal FATHER?” But how can this be?

You see, the father is CONSIDERABLY more recklessly than either of his sons- he is PRODIGAL in his LOVE, he is RECKLESS in his MERCY, and he is all-too EXTRAVAGANT in his FORGIVENESS. He seems THOROUGHLY IRRESPONSIBLE by pouring more love and forgiveness upon his two children than they truly deserve. He is willing to endure insult and injury from them because he is LESS concerned about his own pride and standing in the community and MORE concerned that one of his own was lost but had been found, was dead but is now alive. Yes, the TRUE identity of the prodigal is actually the careless, reckless FATHER who with no thought to either his privileged position or his personal pride, is spontaneous and unrestrained in welcoming his son home and lavishing his love upon him once again. He who had been LOST was now FOUND; he who had been DEAD was ALIVE once again and that was the GREATEST news he could have ever received! He was a son and would ALWAYS be a son and NOTHING would ever alter that relationship.

If you read the parable closely, you'll discover that in the scene where the prodigal acknowledges his sins, it is NOT the CONFESSION that triggers the father's love but the other way around- the father's LOVE that triggers the CONFESSION. Although repentance IS important, God's grace ALWAYS comes first! What this story does is underscore how God's love and grace, just like this father's, is never a PRECONDITION or a REWARD for our repentance or obedience or trust. Rather, it's the OTHER way around- we repent, we love, and we trust BECAUSE we are FIRST ACCEPTED, REGARDLESS of what we may have done in life to either ourselves or to others. We are all sons and daughters FIRST AND FOREMOST and NOTHING will ever change that!

Well, over the couple of weeks we've taken a hard look at each of the characters in this story and the portrait of love and forgiveness it paints for us is an indelible one. But now let me conclude my sermon and this sermon series by providing you a picture of a MODERN-DAY prodigal and how the theme of grace and unconditional love is not limited to just a single event two thousand years old but a PRESENT reality, one available to EVERYONE, THIS VERY MINUTE. With advancing age and after having to deal with the deaths of so many close friends

and family members over the past couple of years, I seem to spend more time scrutinizing the obituary columns than I used to. Well not too long ago, I came across the death notice of Harry Reems who at the age of 65 had passed away in Salt Lake City, Utah. For those of you unfamiliar with the name Harry Reems, he was considered the most famous adult film actor of all time with his movies grossing hundreds of millions of dollars throughout his lifetime. Well it turns out that Harry had a most interesting story. Growing up in a non-practicing Jewish home, in the 1960's he went from college to the Marines and after his discharge, attempting to become a serious actor by studying with Lee Strasberg and even performing some Shakespeare. However, in need of cash, a friend suggested he try his hand at adult films which he discovered was easy money for him. But after a decade of this, he eventually found he wasn't in demand any more. Blowing all his money on drugs and too much partying, he eventually was forced to declare bankruptcy. Depression took hold of this modern-day prodigal and he started drinking 24-hours a day. By his own account, the years between 1985 and 1989 became a complete blank for him and he estimated he was drinking two and a half gallons of vodka a day. He said, "You lose your house, your job, your money- more importantly you lose your self-esteem and self-respect. I used to have a little pistol and I put it to my head so many times, and thank God I didn't have the courage to pull the trigger." Winding up on the streets, he was reduced to panhandling and sleeping in dumpsters.

In 1989, he didn't want to drink anymore and yet he didn't have the courage to take his life. He called around and found there was a 12-step program meeting in Park City, at the city hall there. The police station was also there and before he got to the meeting, he was arrested for a number of outstanding warrants. He pleaded with the sergeant, "Please let me go in this meeting and see what these people do." Afterwards, the cop drove him to the county jail where he said to him, "Harry, you have no idea how much value you could be to people if you only got sober. You have no idea how many people you could help." That was the first time anybody had ever said he had value- EVER.

It was at one of those 12-step meetings where he met a sunny blonde named Jeannie. "I thought it might be a good place to meet someone who believed in God," she said. Not long afterwards, Harry asked her to marry him. He knew right away that she was the person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, something akin, he said, to a spiritual awakening for him. Having no money, they had to borrow \$1,500 for the church wedding. But Harry was now changing. As he explained it, "I was now taking my very addictive, compulsive personality traits and applying them to my work." He got his real-estate license and was soon being regularly nominated for salesman of the year. Eventually he opened his own firm.

There were other changes too. Though he was raised Jewish, he found the Christian faith a very loving one because of one particular minister he had met. He found it gave him a fresh start in life, the opportunity for a new beginning which he knew he desperately needed. He still attended 12-step meetings because it was in that program he first found God- a program that also taught him how to love himself while being able to help to others. The former Jewish kid from Manhattan became an active, church-going Christian, living a quiet, but successful life in Park City. For the first time, he had found that peace he had spent this entire life searching for. Like a patient father, God was simply waiting for the day he would finally "come to himself" and THEN he would kill the fatted calf and hold a celebration in his honor.

My friends, the scriptures provide us with many powerful and stunning portraits- but

none more remarkable than THIS one of the "Waiting Father." Jesus wanted his disciples and followers to know with utmost assurance just what kind of a God he had come to love and serve, a God with a father's heart, a God of everlasting care and concern. This morning he assures US that, like that young son and just like Harry Reems, we TOO share that SAME hope that we CAN begin again. We have someone who sees US while WE are yet afar off, who treasures US in His heart and anticipates that day when WE--just as unworthily--throw ourselves down in his presence. And then our God, our Heavenly Father, will clothe US with the finest robe. He will place rings on OUR fingers and shoes on OUR feet. He will kill the fatted calf that together we might eat and make merry, for once WE were dead, but are now alive, were lost, but PRAISE BE TO GOD have finally been found. Let us pray...

*Merciful and most gracious God, help us to come to ourselves. Help us to return to your love. Help us to see your great tenderness coming towards us. Help us to know that you have already fitted us for the robe and for the ring, and help us to smell the fatted calf of your great forgiveness for us. Lord God, help each of us who hears this story see him or herself in it and know that it is always possible to return home to your great love for us. All this we ask in your name and through the mercy and love of your Son Jesus. Amen.*