

Sermon Luke 15: 11-32 Lent Week 4

Narrator 1: Now all the tax-collectors and “outsiders” were crowding around to hear what Jesus had to say. The Pharisees and the scribes complained about this, remarking, “This man accepts sinners and even eats His meals with them.”

Narrator 2: So Jesus spoke to them, using this parable:

Narrator 1: Once there was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father...

The Younger Son: Father, give me my share of the property that will come to me.

Narrator 2: So the father divided up his property between the two of them. Before very long, the younger son collected all his belongings and went off to a foreign land, where he squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance. And when he had run through all his money, a terrible famine arose in that country, and he began to feel the pinch.

Narrator 1: Then he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him out into the fields to feed the pigs. He got to the point of longing to stuff himself with the garbage the pigs were eating and not a soul gave him anything. Then he came to his sense and cried aloud...

The Younger Son: Why, dozens of my father’s hired hands have got more food than they can eat and here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go back to my father, and I will say to him: Father, I have done wrong in the sight of Heaven and in your eyes. I don’t deserve to be called your child anymore. Please take me on as one of your hired hands.

Narrator 2: So the younger son got up and went to his father. But while he was still some distance off, the father saw him and his heart went out to him, and he ran and embraced him, and kissed him. But his son said...

The Younger Son: Father, I have done wrong in the sight of Heaven and in your eyes. I don’t deserve to be called your child anymore.

Narrator 1: The father called out to the servants...

The Father: Hurry! Fetch the best clothes and put them on him! Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet, and get that calf we’ve fattened and kill it, and we will have a feast and a celebration! For this is my child - I thought he was dead, and he’s alive again. I thought I had lost him, and he’s found!

Narrator 2: And they began to get the festivities going. But his elder son was out in the fields, and as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants across to him and enquired what was the meaning of it all. The servant said, “Your brother has arrived, and your father has killed the calf we fattened because he has got him home again safe and sound.”

Narrator 1: But the older son was furious and refused to go inside the house. So his father came outside and called him. Then he burst out...

The Older Son: Look, how many years have I slaved for you and never disobeyed a single order of yours, and yet you have never given me so much as a young goat, so that I could give my friends a dinner? But when that son of yours arrives, who has spent all your money on prostitutes, for him you kill the calf we’ve fattened!

Narrator 1: But the father replied....

The Father: My dear son, you have been with me all the time and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and show our joy. For this is your brother; I thought he was dead - and he’s alive. I thought he was lost - and he is found!

Everyone: This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is the fourth Sunday of Lent and Easter is in sight. I think if we've observed... if we've entered into and experienced Lent this year then we'll really be able to celebrate Easter with rings on our fingers, and sandals on our feet, the Father's robe around our shoulders, and the feast of the fatted calf. These are images from today's scripture lesson... and although I often use that word to describe scripture this particular scripture really is a lesson. This parable is referred to as the essence of the bible. In this story Jesus told we are meant to understand - to accept, and believe - the depths of God's love and forgiveness for us... and for all sinners.

Today is called "Forgiveness Sunday" and that's what Jesus' story is about... giving and accepting forgiveness. We are meant to find ourselves in scripture... maybe not in the book of Numbers (this is only funny if you've read through the book of Numbers) but in the stories of God's interactions with people, and especially in Jesus' parables. In these parables Jesus gives us glimpses of heaven. The story of the Prodigal Son is a glimpse of heaven... and a long look at the love and forgiveness God has for all the world. "Forgiveness Sunday" gives us the opportunity to superimpose Jesus' parable about the love and forgiveness of God onto our own need to forgive, and to be forgiven.

Everyone has a picture in their bulletin that we used for the reading of the gospel. It's also for our reflection this morning, so please find your picture. The audience responses at a melodrama - booing and hissing and cheering as the characters are introduced and the story unfolds - might be similar to the responses Jesus' listeners had, hearing to His story about two a father and his two sons. Luke tells us that a large crowd was traveling with Jesus. So He taught them as they walked, as a tour guide might, or He gathered them under a tree to speak to them, as a teacher might. This parable is shocking, outrageous, and there would have been gasps, heads shaking, and eyes popping as Jesus unfolded this outrageous look at God's kingdom.

If you have a picture of the pigs then this story begins with you. The younger son has asked for his share of the inheritance... which he would rightly receive only when his father had died, and the land was sold. The younger son's request as good as told the father that he wished he'd die so he could receive his inheritance. In that traditional and patriarchal culture such disrespect for a father, and for the land, and for the community (asking for an inheritance before the death of the father) was shameful and unacceptable behavior. Jesus' listeners would have sucked in their breath, hearing the younger son's embarrassing disregard for his father.

After the father did give him his share of the inheritance, the younger son left with his money which he wasted pretty quickly, and he was left with nothing. Jesus said that the entire region found itself hungry because of a famine, and the younger son was desperate. He hired himself out to a pig-farmer. Now the gasps from Jesus' listeners would have been clearly heard. Jews are forbidden to eat pork. Just working with pigs would make the younger son unclean. And an unclean person was considered a sinner to be shunned, and considered a carrier of spiritual (and even physical) death.

The younger son now had nothing, and found himself helplessly hungry. He forced himself to return to his father, hoping to beg to return as one of his father's slaves. If you have the picture of the younger son... how does it feel to have thrown away all of your father's good gifts to you? How does it feel to be really hungry and have no one offer even what the pigs are

fed? How does it feel to have to drag yourself back home, every step of the way rehearsing what you'll say to your father? How does it feel to physically carry your sinfulness on your bare feet and your ragged clothes and in your empty belly? How did this happen? If you have the picture of the younger son, this morning's "Gathering Song" *Amazing Grace*, is for you. "I once was lost..."

On this "Forgiveness Sunday" do you, like the younger son, need to ask forgiveness of someone you've hurt or wronged? Can you, like the younger son, bow your proud head and bend your stubborn knee and ask to be forgiven?

[silence]

If you have the picture of the heart you are the father in Jesus' parable. This father is the seeker and finder of the lost. His desire is to be reconciled, which means "to make good again." He isn't a doormat or a push-over... but a conduit through which love and mercy flow. He freely offered love and forgiveness because he knew it to be an inexhaustible resource.

The men listening to Jesus' parable would have frowned and scoffed at the indignity of a man who ran to meet his son. A first century man simply would not run. But the father in Jesus' story doesn't care about dignity or appearances. His only thought is to be reconciled... to restore a broken relationship... to seek and find the lost. The father's response to his sinful, shameful son returning home was to put the father's own robe on him, to put the ring with the family crest on his finger, and to put sandals (a symbol of a free man and not a slave) on his feet, and then to throw a party and invite the neighbors so that his son would be welcomed back into the community instead of ostracized for his outrageous behavior.

If you have the picture of the heart of the father, how does it feel to know that people might think it's ridiculous, and you are a fool, to run and meet your disrespectful and disobedient child? How does it feel to not demand... to not even want... groveling or some kind of proof of how sorry your son is? How does it feel to just hold your child in your arms and welcome him back to the family? Perhaps the most important question for you is... how does it feel to know that the father in Jesus' parable is God... and that God runs to meet you (and all sinners) and offers you love and forgiveness? If you have the picture of the father, then this morning's special music sung by Don Keeble (and all of us) is for you. Love, love, love, love, love. It's all about love.

On this "Forgiveness Sunday" can you, like the father in Jesus' story, be reconciled to someone who's hurt or offended you? Who needs your forgiveness? Can you freely offer love and forgiveness to someone who doesn't deserve it... simply because in God's storehouse, in God's heart, there is an inexhaustible supply of love and forgiveness? And because God has, and does, and always will offer to you... God's sinful and dearly loved child... love and mercy?
[silence]

If you have the picture of the hand held up you are the older son. This is from an expression, "talk to the hand." It's a sarcastic expression meaning, "I don't want to hear it." The whole phrase is, "Talk to the hand 'cause the ears aren't listening."

Jesus' story is known as the parable of the Prodigal Son, but there's a second son in the story who seems almost an afterthought... but a most important person for us to hear about, and maybe the most offensive person to the observant Jews, the religious "insiders" who were among those in Jesus' audience. I don't know what the opposite of the "black sheep" of the family is... is it the "good son" or the "good daughter"? This is the child who does what's expected and doesn't disappoint or disgrace the family. The older brother in Jesus' parable

was apparently - at first glance - the good son. But he was as full as his younger brother was empty.

This parable could be called "The Two Lost Sons" because the older son was also lost (and interestingly didn't know it.) But instead of lost and empty like his younger brother, the older son was lost and full... full of self-righteousness, self-assurance, and self-pity. He was so full there was no room in him for joy, for celebration, nor for love, or for forgiveness.

The older son spoke to the father as shamefully as his younger brother had. He spit out the words, "That son of yours" and Jesus' listeners would have again expressed shock and disapproval at the older son's contempt for his father. A father could rightfully disown and disinherit such a disrespectful child. But instead the father reasoned with the older son and invited him to share the father's joy in the lost son being found. And here the parable ends.

Jesus didn't give an ending to the story, so we don't know if the older son wanted to be reconciled, inside the house with the party going on, inside the father's heart that was big enough for both sinful and self-centered sons... or if he chose instead to stay outside and be outraged, and ostracize himself. If you have the card with the hand held up.... How does it feel to be so angry with the father's love and mercy for your undeserving younger brother? How does it feel to have stayed home, and done everything right, and to see love and forgiveness offered to the brother who left, who did everything wrong? How does it feel to believe that love and forgiveness must be earned and deserved, only to see that it freely given? How does it feel to know that you have the choice to be reconciled and included in the celebration... or to walk away? If you have the picture of the hand held up then this morning's "Gathering Song" *As the Deer Pants for the Water* is for you. "You alone are my strength, my shield. To you alone may my spirit yield."

On this "Forgiveness Sunday" can you (perhaps like the older son) accept that God's love and forgiveness, and God's grace and compassion, are for you and for all sinners, and for all the world, and not just those who deserve it... not just those who believe like you and live like you but for all whom God has created? And can you work for and with God, to offer love and forgiveness and reconciliation to the world? Or will you choose to stay outside until the party's over? [silence]

This morning we come to the Lord's Table because He invites us. There is room here for all of us. There is room in God's heart, in God's kingdom... for all the world. In Jesus' parable we are to see that there is room. And depending on whether we know ourselves to be a "younger son" or an "older son" that's the best news we've ever heard or... we're not sure we want to hear it. Amen.

Now please stand as you're able and let's sing *Take Our Bread* as we prepare ourselves to receive the body and blood, and the love and forgiveness, of Jesus Christ.