

“FOUR STORIES: III – THE PRODIGAL SON”

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I Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:11-32

A couple of weeks ago, I told you that my last four sermons were going to center on four of my favorite Biblical stories. The first one, two weeks ago, was “The Last Supper.” Last week, it was about God’s call on our lives as seen through the calls of Moses and the rich young ruler.

So now we’re down to the final two. The one I’ve chosen today, the parable of the prodigal son, wasn’t always one of my top favorites, but I’ll tell you why it is today, and how it became that for me. It’s a story I’ve told some of you already, but it bears repeating.

Many, many years ago, when I was in my first appointment at Aldersgate United Methodist Church, a member of the church came to talk to me about a friend of theirs who was critically ill in the hospital. I don’t remember much about the patient, except that the church member told me that she was not a church-goer and had never even read the Bible. But lately, as she had been getting sicker and sicker, she had been asking questions of faith to this woman from my church. She

seemed to be seeking something more, and so my church member decided she wanted to give her a Bible.

The reason she came to me was that she wanted my advice on what to tell her friend she should read in the Bible. Of course, she could have started at Genesis, but along about Leviticus or Numbers, it might be a struggle. She really, really wanted her friend to find strength in scripture – thus, her question to me, “What passages should I mark for my friend – who is so ill, and who has never read the Bible – to read?”

So I thought about it for a few days, and came up with a small list of scriptures, at the top of which was the 23rd Psalm. That is such a comforting psalm for so many – I was sure that should be one of the first places she should go.

Now, for some reason, and who knows why, except that it was probably a “shoulder tap” as we learned about last week (God tapped me on my shoulder and nudged me into doing it), I happened to be talking on the phone with one of my brothers. He’s younger than I am, and I love him dearly, but when it comes to faith,

we're pretty far apart. Though both of us grew up in church and in the home of a faithful family, I ended up as a pastor and he, a non-believer.

Thus, you see, it had to be a God-thing that made me ask him about the task that had been put before me – to identify scriptures for this woman to read. I told him that I had spent time thinking about it, and at the top of my list was the 23rd Psalm.

Imagine my surprise when he responded, “No. Not the 23rd Psalm. The Parable of the Prodigal Son. That’s the one you should tell her to read.” And then he went on to explain. “If you’re struggling with faith, and you turn to the 23rd Psalm, here’s what you hear: that’s someone is in control of you – you know, ‘he leadeth me . . . and so on. That’s not necessarily something you want to hear.”

“But think about the parable of the Prodigal Son. What’s the message there? That no matter how bad you are, how lost you are, how judgmental or angry you may be, that God comes running to you with open arms and offers you grace. That’s what someone who is seeking needs to read.”

I have to tell you, I was incredibly moved by our conversation that day, and I've never forgotten it. My brother was absolutely right. Encapsulated in this one parable is the story of our faith in Jesus Christ – how all of us are lost for one reason or another, and the God of all grace comes to us in Christ and wraps his arms around us and loves us, period. Not because we deserve it, not because we earned it, simply because he loves us like no other.

So let's spend some time in this parable this morning, looking at a father's love for his sons, not coincidentally on Father's Day.

Before we turn to the parable itself, let me give you the back story to Jesus' telling of it. Jesus has been under attack by the religious authorities, and just before he tells this parable, they, the Pharisees, have criticized him because, as they said, "this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." They didn't like the company he was keeping. He shouldn't be hanging out with sinners and treating them like they were something. He should have standards, like they did.

So, as he did so often, Jesus told a story – actually a few stories - to help them see truth. He told them three stories about being lost – a lost sheep, a lost coin, and then this one about lost sons.

A father had two sons. One day, the younger one came to him and said he wanted to take off and see the world, but he needed money to do so. He wanted his inheritance ahead of time, and so his father gave it to him, and off the young man went. Meanwhile, there's another brother, an older one, who stayed by his father's side and did what he was supposed to do.

Well, time marches on and the younger son is having a grand time sowing his wild oats, but soon enough the party was over. He'd run through all his money, and on top of that, a famine hit the land, so he was in deep trouble. The only work he could find was feeding slop to a man's pigs. He was about as low as he could go.

That's when the scripture says "he came to himself," in other words, he hit rock bottom and realized the error of his ways. So he decided to go back home like a dog with his tail between his legs, beg for his father's mercy, and hopefully get a fresh start back home with his family. He wasn't at all sure how it was going to go,

because he knew his father had every right to turn his back on him after what he had done.

But he set off for home, all the while rehearsing what he would say, how he would confess, how he would throw himself at his father's feet and take whatever he could get.

Not far from the house, he lifts his head up from his pondering, to see an incredible sight – his father – not waiting for him on the porch, or turning away from him, but running toward him – actually running toward him, with arms open wide and a heart filled with compassion.

Even as his father hugged him, the young man confessed, but it was as if his father wasn't listening, instead he was instructing the servants to start a celebration for the return of his beloved son.

It would be nice if the story ended there, but oh, there's more, a not so happy side. Because there's that older brother, you see, the one who had stayed, the one

who had slaved away, doing double the work since his brother had bailed on them, the one who had watched his father's heart be broken, watched his sadness. Now, out in the field where he always was, he hears a commotion up by the house. Something was going on, so he went to find out, only to be stunned to find out that his brother had returned, and shockingly, their father was rejoicing, and not only rejoicing, but throwing a party for him!

To say he was unhappy is an understatement. He was livid. Though his father tried to explain, he would have no part of it. All he kept talking about was how he had been the loyal one, how he had done everything he was supposed to do, how he was the one who should be celebrated. He was so angry, so focused on himself and what he had done, that he wouldn't join the party – and that father's heart was broken all over again. It was like one lost son had come home, and the one who had stayed home was lost in anger and bitterness.

What a story! There's probably not a one of us looking at this story that has trouble identifying with both of those sons, right? I mean, if we've lived anytime at all, we know that we have sinned like that younger son did, that there have been times that we've thought only of ourselves and what would make us happy, and gone ahead and done it, realizing later the error of our ways.

And, if we're truthful, we also know that we've probably been like that older brother at times, because, I think it's safe to say, we, more often than not, do the right thing, fulfill our responsibilities, try to be good people of faith, good family members, good citizens. But, like the Pharisees, sometimes the flip side of that, is that we judge people who don't do those things. We're score keepers.

The good news of this parable is that the father loves both of those brothers – both of them, because of who they are, and yes, perhaps, in spite of who they are. He loves them and wants the best for them. And he wants to be with both of them. He's got love enough, mercy enough, grace enough to open his arms and hold both of them.

Dear friends, in a nutshell, this parable is the story of God's love for us poured out in Christ Jesus. He's got love enough, mercy enough, grace enough to embrace all of us, whether we are worthy or not, whether we've been faithful all our lives, or squandered our lives in loose living, as that younger brother did.

No matter where we find ourselves, even today, we can look up and see the Lord with his arms wide open ready to embrace us, and offer us abundant life. The

depth of his mercy is unfathomable, the grace he offers to us again and again is, indeed, amazing.

Please never feel like you can't be redeemed, that you've sinned too badly, you've wandered too far away. And please never be so filled with resentment or anger or bitterness that your heart doesn't have room for grace. As one pastor put it, this parable shows us that God "invites us into the place of joy." He wants us to know joy, he wants us to know that we can't earn it on our own, but it's his gift to us. We simply need to receive it, which means opening our arms to him as he opens his arms to us.

I love this story, this parable, because it is a vivid portrayal of the human condition – our condition – and a stunningly beautiful portrayal of our Lord Jesus Christ, that shows in a most touching and intimate way how much he loves each and every one of us, and wants us to know life in abundance. Of all the sermons I've preached over 35 years, if those who had heard my words, have heard nothing more than God's amazing grace poured out in Christ Jesus, that will have been enough. He lived for us, he died for us, he loves us more than we can possibly comprehend, he forgives us again and again, and he offers us life – full life, real life,

abundant life, eternal life. That, my friends, is the Good News of the Gospel.

Thanks be to God. Amen.