

“A Father’s Love”

Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21;
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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Why did he do it? Did you ever ask that question about what the younger son was doing? Why did he do it? I’m sure the father didn’t say, “Here, take your inheritance.” In fact, it says the son had to ask for it. So why did he do it? What was in his mind? Certainly there was something that suggested that staying there with his father was not the best thing.

There’s a children’s story that talks about a goose, Petunia, who is behind a fence and continually looking out at the field and up the hill and into the woods. She is absolutely sure that the grass at the top of the hill has got to be so much better than the grass in the yard. So one day somebody accidentally left the gate open and Petunia starts to go up the hill. She first tastes the grass at the bottom and says, “Well, it’s not that much different. It’s got to be better as I go up.”

She gets mid-way up the hill and it’s really not that much better. In fact, it’s not quite as good. Finally she gets near the top and says, “What’s the matter? This grass isn’t very good.” Not only that, she looks up and sees at the edge of the woods a fox, and she starts to scamper down the hill as fast as she can go. The fox is right on her heels. Lucky for her, the barnyard dog starts to bark just as the fox is about to catch her. The fox breaks off for a moment and she gets away and back into the gate.

It’s really a story of a prodigal goose that thinks the grass is better somewhere else. Of course, we have to begin to think what that means in a human context. What kind of grass do we think we would find if we looked somewhere else, went with the somewhere else that the world is always showing us? If I look at what the son did, it seems to suggest that perhaps he thinks that if he can just spend all his money on fulfilling all of his desires, then he will have achieved happiness or something. What he finds is that it’s only dissolute living. I love that term because there’s a sense that it just dissolves away.

It goes away and he finds himself hungry. A famine comes to the land, a hunger. It’s interesting to use that idea of hunger because it’s not only that sense of being hungry physically, but perhaps there is in him now this hunger for something more, as well. A spiritual hunger, perhaps. He comes to his senses, it says. He realizes that the situation he’s in is dire and he’s dying of hunger. He realizes that even if he goes back and is on the fringes of his father’s household, he would be better off.

It’s a little bit dangerous thing to do because back in those days a son who had not honored his father could be stoned. So he’s coming back with some hope that at least his father will accept his apology. He doesn’t seem to expect at all what he receives—that full-fledged, open-armed acceptance, a welcome back. It is perhaps this scene, as much as any, that makes us think of a God that loves us unconditionally. And there he is, welcomed.

Then the parable is over. No? No. And perhaps part of the reason it’s not over is the people he was talking to at the time were not prodigals, or at least not in the same way.

And so we go on to the older son. I kept looking at this over the week and thinking about this older son and really wondering how much difference there was between the two of them. It felt like maybe some of the anger the older son had was that the younger son got to go do all that and he didn't. That is, there seemed to be a similar view of the world. Perhaps they really had the same goals, maybe a little different guidance, but expected some of the same kinds of gifts from the world.

Remember last week. Really the prodigal son is the poster child of what I was talking about last week. The decisions we make have consequences. That really is how I can summarize what I was trying to say last week. The decisions we make have consequences and Jesus was trying to tell us there are ways to have better consequences. In some ways, this parable is too.

It feels like both sons have a similar view of the world. The guidance is slightly different. Do you take the bull by the horns and go after it or do you bide your time and try to suppress some of those urges at the moment because if you do it will be better in the end? What it suggests to me is that both of them are products of their world. The world suggests there are goals for them and gives them a particular kind of guidance and gives them expectations of the gifts they should receive from the world.

We've been reading Richard Rohr in our Wednesday evening book study, and he suggests that in our present time God gives us goals, guidance, and gifts. What Richard Rohr suggests is that the world tells us something different—that power, prestige, and possessions are what are important. It feels like, in some ways, that's what these guys are about. Maybe tweaked a little bit for us in our day and age. Is it a world that tells us that power, prestige, and possessions are what are important?

There's always a sense that it's always in the future, as well. Because what I hear in this story is that as these two young men look at the world, they can't see what's right there before them—a good father's love that supports and enables them, that gives them life. They look at what the world tells them they should have—a different set of goals, guidance, and gifts. Is the difference between the sons simply the question: do we just try to go along until we can get those things or do we go right after it?

The struggle, it feels to me, is that it's easy to get on one of these extremes or go off in either of these directions. Then, if our life doesn't happen to hit the famine at the right time we don't tend to turn around. That need to turn around is what both John the Baptist and Jesus have just been saying. It's about turning around, turning to God. It's a repentance, a turn-around, guidance back because there's a loving father.

The fascinating thing is that one of them finds out and comes back on his own. He comes and finds that the father is even more compassionate than he expected. The other one, the father has to go to and plead with to come into the party.

It's easy to stay focused on the sons and the problems they have, but let's focus for a moment on the father—the good father. I know that "father" as a general word can be a bit of a struggle, but this is a good father. And what are the characteristics of this good father? I have been told that a good father would never let his son go off in dissolute living. But this is a good father, and what does this good father do? He allows his sons to

have agency. He allows his sons to make choices and live with the consequences. He allows his sons to be their own people. In fact, in a way, he's supporting them so they can be their own people.

Then what does the father do? He watches. It says he watches the road. He watches in hope. He watches his sons for their turn-around. He's caring. He doesn't forget about them. He watches, and then when he sees the right moment, what do we see in the father? That incredible compassion, the forgiveness, the ability to take in the prodigal. If the father's goals, guidance, and gifts were power, prestige and possessions and the son came back with none of those, would it be the same kind of thing? But the father opens his arms and welcomes the son back. So we see the compassion.

But that doesn't stop the story. He goes and talks to the older son. There is pleading. So God not only watches and waits because he knows some people will turn around, but with others there is pleading. This is an incredible image. Would you think God would ever plead with us? That's a hard image for me, and yet we think of God as the good father of this story and he goes and pleads with the older son. He's a God that reaches out. It's an incredible image of a God who has the compassion for the return and a God who reaches out to enable the return. It's an invitation; an invitation to a party. It's a God who knows how to throw a party to celebrate.

What an incredible vision and image this is of God. Yet, it's a hard image, because often I'm like one of the two sons. I'm worried that God won't take me back because I've done things that are too bad or I'm angry that God takes somebody else back because they don't deserve it. And if I really let this idea of power, prestige, and possessions get in my way, if that's what's really important, no wonder the older son doesn't want the other one back. He got rid of half the power of the family, he broke the prestige of the family, he squandered half the possessions of the family.

What is at work in the father is a very different thing. I think we might hear echoes of it in what Jesus says: love God with your heart, mind soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. It's a very different goal and guidance than saying what's really important is power, prestige, and possessions or whatever set it is for us.

Jesus gives us, then, some pretty simple guidance. If we're going to follow him, if we're going to see the goal, if we're going to recognize the gift of God's grace and presence among us and be able to celebrate that, what are some ways we might live? Well, treat others the way you want to be treated. What Jesus does is change the point of view, and that's what it asks me to do over and over again.

I've read this passage a million times, it feels like, and yet each time it asks me again, where I am in this passage. Perhaps it's why this is a Lent passage, because it continues to ask me where am I. Am I a younger son or an older son? Can I accept the invitation to come to the table and to simply be a child of God and to know the Father's love and how that changes everything? So we are invited to the table today because we have a Father who loves us. A good, good Father. Amen.