

“What a Story!”

Leviticus 20:7-9; Jeremiah 3:19-22;
Galatians 1:1-5; Luke 15:1-2, 22-32

August 26, 2018
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

We are going to begin to think about the story that Jesus gives us. Sometimes we can talk about the story of our lives as we try to remember how it all fits together and makes for one life. It's our story. Sometimes we think about a story as that thing that helps us understand how everything fits together.

So as we think about the Pharisees and scribes, they had a story that they were living their lives by. There was a way they understood the nature of life in their time and how to make it better. Their story was, pretty much, to think that God had given them a set of rules, and if they just followed those rules then God would come and make life better for everybody. So when there was a problem with sinners, it was not just a problem that those sinners were there and having a problem in their own lives. In some respects, having sinners amongst them meant that maybe God wouldn't come because God wanted a righteous people. In their minds, righteousness meant living correctly by the rules.

When Jesus came and started sitting with these sinners and tax collectors, they were thinking, “What is he doing? If he's a teacher of the law, he should know better. God won't come if he's pandering to these folks. He needs to be with righteous folks.” I'm using righteous in that sense of being right in relationship to the law, which isn't the way I usually use it. But that, I think, is the story of the scribes and Pharisees. So they were grumbling about what Jesus was doing.

So Jesus tells a couple of parables that suggest that finding what's lost is really important. Then he tells this story. There was a father who had two sons. That's a pretty simple beginning. There's nothing complex about that. But quickly it changes into something that would have just been shocking to those who heard it. He had two sons and the younger came to him and said, “Father, I want my inheritance now.” Now, with first century ears, you might hear that as, “Father, I wish you were dead.” He's asking for his inheritance. That's a thing you don't ask for before your father dies, so when he asked for it, he's really saying, “Father, I wish you were dead. Give me the money and let me go.”

That's a shocking thing. And it would have been shocking not only in the family, but to the village or town they were part of because everybody pretty much would have known everybody's business. That was so against tradition.

Then, there were two other things about what happened next. One, we don't hear anything from the older son. You see, the role for the older son in that tradition would have been for him to speak up right away and say, “Oh, no. Let's fix this.” He should have played the role of reconciler. Then, when the father unexpectedly said he would split the money between his sons, the older son should have said, “No, father. I don't

want the money. I don't want anything. I don't want to think of you being dead. I don't want the inheritance." But we don't hear anything from him.

And then, the father should have said, "No!" And if I were to put an expletive in, that's the emphasis that tradition tells him to use. Look what we read out of Leviticus— if a son dishonors his father, you can take him to the gate and have him stoned. The father should have said, "No," and punished him. This is the first time we see the father doing something pretty unexpected for that time period. He says, "OK, here's your inheritance, a third of all I have." And the son goes off.

Why did the son go off? What story was in his mind? In that time period there were different stories. It certainly wasn't his village or town's story to do that. It wasn't his traditional story. It wasn't his Jewish story that led him to go away. Maybe he had heard something about those Greeks – those epicureans or those hedonists. Maybe it's just part of our human nature to be tempted to do something just for ourselves, and to go off and make it on our own, and to go away from those folks who know us so well who seem to be holding us back. Whatever it is, he had a different story in mind, so he took a different path.

It's interesting to think about the word for *sin*, and how it means *to go off the path* or *to miss the goal*. We think about the son taking a different path. His path is one he sets for himself. He goes to a far land, which is a pretty strange thing for a Jewish person to do anyway, to completely leave his village behind. When the villagers found out about it, they may have gone through a ceremony that said, "You are now no longer part of us. You're dead to us. You're gone."

Anyway, he goes to this foreign land. We don't know exactly how he spends all his money in dissolute living. I don't know exactly what that is. It doesn't describe exactly what kind of dissolute living it is, but we know he squanders all that he had. Then a famine comes.

When Jesus was telling this story, within a 200 year span around Jesus' life there were a total of about nine famines in that region. People knew about famines. It was part of their experience. If they had not been through a famine themselves, they had certainly heard about them and recognized the hardship that came with a famine.

It's hard for us to even think about it. I've never lived through a time in my life where I consider I was truly in a famine. I have never starved. I never tried to find somebody who would save me by giving me a job or a little food. But that's what this guy did, and he did it in a foreign land. He asked for help from somebody who almost had to have been a Gentile because he was raising pigs. He sent the young man out to feed pods to the pigs, probably carob pods—the wild kind that were inedible.

The young man had a story in mind. He's going to live it out. He's going to find fulfillment. And we see the story crash. The story doesn't work. Since he was feeding

pigs, if there was a place to carry out his religion, he couldn't have done it. He was unclean.

The scripture says "he came to himself." I don't know exactly what it means when it says he came to himself, but maybe what he came to was back to the story he knew, the story he had rejected. It was probably the story of the Judaic pattern. He realized that where there was sustenance was in his father's house, but he knew he had sinned against his father and against heaven. He sinned against God and against his father. He had gone off on the wrong path toward a different goal. So he was going to repent.

Repentance in Judaism at that time was about making up for the wrong you had done. They had this whole sacrificial system at the Temple to make up for what you had done wrong. His idea was "I'll go back, tell him I've sinned, acknowledge what I've done wrong, and become a hired hand." Now, a hired hand would have been one who was basically a day-laborer. He would have lived somewhere else. He wouldn't have been part of the father's house, and he would have tried to pay back what he had squandered, the way he had offended. So he starts back.

The one problem with this is, even if his father accepts his request and allows him to begin to work on paying it back, he still has the village to deal with. The village has said, "You're gone." They don't want him back. As he starts coming back down the road, he's got to be thinking, "How am I going to get through the village to talk to my father?" Because as soon as the villagers saw him they probably would have gone out on the road and started taunting him, flinging insults at him, and maybe even physical abuse.

The amazing thing about this story is what happens next. The father sees him from afar and starts running. Now we don't think that much about a father running, but in middle-eastern culture, a father, especially of his stature, would have been wearing flowing robes and to run he would have had to grab his robes, pull them up and run down the road. One, a person of his stature wasn't expected to run, and two, he shouldn't be showing his bare legs. It was humiliating!

The father humiliated himself to greet the son, and before the son can say anything, he begins to shower him with kisses and hugs. This may not have just been for the son. The villagers would have seen it as well, and they would have realized quickly that the father was reconciling with the son, that he was taking that humility on himself in order to welcome the son back. The same thing with giving him the best robes and all that, telling the servants to make him son again.

What about the son? He is able to say this much, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." Where's the part about making him a hired hand? Some people think he got interrupted. Maybe. There's also the possibility that in that moment he had to make a choice. He had to make a choice as to whether he was going to continue to try to work out that old story that he knew through Judaism, that he knew through his village tradition, where he had to go it on his own and repay his father. But

he was in this moment where his father was showing him this surprise gift of love, which we now call grace, and he had to make a decision.

“Do I accept that grace, or do I continue with that other story? My father is offering a different story—a story of grace, a story of restoration.” It’s not without some struggle that he would make that decision. If he makes the decision to accept that grace, he will no longer be on his own. He’s now dependent on his father’s grace. And, he has to live in his brother’s household. It doesn’t feel like there was a lot of love lost between the two. His decision is not without consequences, but he sees a new story being offered to him. He sees the father’s love for him and he can’t help but accept it. So he doesn’t ask to be made a hired hand.

The father invites everyone to begin celebrating. He has restored the son. He has given him a new story—a story in which he can come back in and be part of the family. (Next week we will look at the idea of how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live together in harmony.) But the father is inviting him in to the household again to experience that grace, that restoration, and to have that new story—a new story about who he is and who he can be. He has to think about being dependent on his father.

We are offered all kinds of stories about how things are, and how we should live our lives, and what we should pay attention to, and how it all fits together. Jesus is confronting these scribes and Pharisees with another kind of story; a story about a loving father that we probably can identify with God, suggesting that maybe these sinners and tax collectors are like this son who is being welcomed home.

Maybe God welcomes those who come home to him and gives them a new story, or gives us a new story whenever we’ve been the Prodigal. It is a story that asks us about our own story. What’s our story? What do we live our lives by? Are we sure of ourselves, independent, going our own way? Or do we recognize our dependence on the love and grace of God?

What’s our story? Amen.