

September 13, 2020

"The Prodigal"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 15:1-2, 11-31

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As almost all of you know, two weeks ago last Thursday my father passed away. He was a Purdue graduate with a mechanical engineering degree, an Air Force jet pilot, a hard working farmer, a successful banker, and good friend to so many, many, people. At his funeral service, I can honestly say that I don't think I've ever heard the words "kind" and "gentle" and "humble." used so many times to describe a person. Yes, that's who my dad was. But I want to share with you two stories told to me that I had never heard before. One was from a man in his 70's who had worked for my dad as a young boy, helping him bale hay in the summer. Baling hay back in the 1950's was hard, dirty work, and a long arduous process. And this "young boy" would watch as my dad used his big knife to cut the twine used to bale the hay. Well, one day he brought his own little knives to work and took them out of his pocket to show my dad. In retrospect, he said, they were just dinky things, but he told me that my dad stopped working, looked at and examined the knives carefully, and commented on "How fine they were, and how proud I should be to have them." Now, some sixty years later, that man still remembers the day my father was so gracious to him. The other story is about a farmer who lived across the road from us and died suddenly. He had cattle in his field that were visibly upset when that farmer stopped showing up to visit with them, talk to them, and feed them. That's what good farmers do with their cattle. And animal behaviorists will tell you that cows can mourn and cry and even shed tears for the loss of a human friend. My dad could hear them crying, so he went to the farmer's widow and asked if he could move the cattle into a field where my dad kept his cattle, so that he would be able to take care of them and console them. To many of us, that might not be a big deal. But to those who farm for a living, it was important enough that it's been remembered all these years.

Like I said, among dad's many virtues, the thought of him being so gracious and compassionate to a young boy and a widow, and even her cattle, was so comforting to me during this especially hard time. I know some of us may not have had earthy fathers like mine. I freely admit that I have been blessed. But all of us do have a heavenly father that is gracious and compassionate and loves us and cares for us. And sometimes, we need to be reminded of that. That's why I chose today's parable. So let's review this very familiar story. It tells of a young son who demands his inheritance from his father. He spends the inheritance poorly, eventually ending up in a pig sty, and returns home penniless, degraded and broken. But instead of disowning his younger son, the father, who obviously represents God, embraces him and calls for a huge celebration for his son's return - with a robe, a ring, a fatted calf. But there's

also an older brother in this story as well, who struggles to understand his father's excitement for the returned son and, in fact, is envious and complains bitterly.

Now many pastors like to write into their sermons the question, "Which one of the three characters do you most identify with?" So let's think about that for a moment. Obviously that question can bring about many emotions. Our fatherly, and particularly our motherly instincts, want to make us identify with the parent in this parable, especially as we think about our own children. We've all had to deal with issues surrounding our kids. But that really reflects the narrowest understanding of the story. Or, we become captured by the emotion of the fall and redemption story of the younger son and his experience, and we identify with him... probably because we've all personally been there in one way or another. But that too misses the most important point of the parable. And that is – it's really a story about the older son. And who is the older son? Someone once asked the noted theologian Friedrich Krummacher, who the older brother was, Krummacher answered, "I learned it only yesterday. It is me." "It is me." Yes, brothers and sister, it is you and me!

So let's look closer at the older brother, by first contrasting him with his younger brother. Now this parable is usually referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Because the word prodigal means doing something recklessly, extravagantly, lavishly. And indeed, Jesus tells us the younger brother demands his inheritance and goes off to a faraway country where he recklessly wasted all his money on wild living and things of this world. And that faraway place, that faraway country Jesus is referring to, is not really a place at all, but instead is a state of separation from God. Maybe, one time in your life you were in that faraway country as well. Maybe you still are to a degree. Or maybe your child or grandchild is there now. And we all know what happens there, don't we? We go searching for meaning and purpose in the things of this world, spending our time, our money, our energy, thinking we can somehow find or buy our happiness, or self-worth, or peace, or contentment, without God's presence in our lives. In that regard, all of us are prodigal sons and daughters, because we've all taken our talents, our health, our earth's resources, so many of the gifts and blessings God has given to us, and, at times, we've squandered them.

But Jesus tells us that there is a way out of that brokenness, that faraway place. And that way out is to simply return home and come back to God. Come back to God, where he is waiting for you with all graciousness and compassion. Ready to take you back, unconditionally. And here's something I want you to take note of because it's one of the gems that really define this parable. In fact, it's so important that Jesus emphasizes it two times. You see, Jesus never calls this young man a sinner. No, never! He

was only lost. Only lost! And now he is found. He was dead, but now he is alive. Given another chance, given a new life. Hallelujah!

Now this alone makes for a wonderful story, but like I said, the epilogue to this story, the main point, all has to do with the older son. The one who became angry and envious and refused to be part of the celebration. Theologian William Arnot puts it this way: “All the excesses of the younger son will not shut him out of God’s kingdom, for he came home, (back to God). But all the virtues of the older son, (obedience, loyalty, hard work), none of those will get him into God’s kingdom for he does not have (love) in his heart.” Think about that statement a moment. You see, even though this brother resided in the same house and thought he was close to the father, God, and did all the right things to please him, he too, was in a faraway place of separation from God. Why? Because he did not have the heart of God. Even though he lived in a house of mercy, he wanted justice to be meted out. Even though he lived in a house of reconciliation, he wanted retribution. Even though he lived in a house of love and graciousness and compassion, he felt none of it. Yet, here too, the father went out to him, trying to console him, pleading with him not to be angry, imploring him to love and forgive his brother. Just as we are called to do.

That’s the point Jesus is making – that is the kind of love God wants from you and me. God desires above all else that we enter into such a connection with him and his divine love that our hearts are as his heart – that we overcome the the resentment, the anger, the envy, the self-pride we harbor inside. For God knows that if you have genuine love in your heart for others, everything else in your life will fall into place. Your relationships, your home life, your work life, your inner being. You will be at peace and contentment with yourself and the world and with God.

And one more final point. When we talk about the prodigal son, could it be that the real prodigal in this story is God, the father? Because he is the one who loves us recklessly, extravagantly, lavishly. He the one who says to us, “All that is mine is yours. All my love, my acceptance, my guidance, my wisdom, my peace, my mercy, my joy. Here it is, all of it, it’s yours.” Could it be so hard to give up a robe, a ring, a fatted calf...the trappings of this earthly life, in return for the love and blessings and gifts of life with Almighty God?

Now isn’t that cause for celebration? Amen.

Prayer

O Loving, extravagant, prodigal God, we come humbly before you, knowing that you shower on us mercy upon mercy and grace upon grace. Your love is perfect and it knows no bounds. We are blessed, and we thank you. And, Lord, we want to have that same kind of love for others. Help us remember, as St. Paul said, that “love is patient and kind, it is not boastful or proud or irritable. It does not demand its own way, and keeps no record of being wronged. Love never fails. Yes, faith, hope and love, these three, and the greatest of these is love.” May our hearts be as your heart, may we give extravagantly as we have extravagantly received. This we ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.