

Following the Footsteps of Jesus; to the Table

Shepherd's Grace Church

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Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³So he told them this parable: ¹¹Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' ³¹Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" (Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32) (also read Joshua 6: 9-12, 2 Cor. 5: 16-21)

Today we are more than half-way through Lent. There are only 3 Sundays left till Easter! How are you doing? Are you keeping your covenant with God this year? If you gave up something are you struggling with it? If you added something to your life; an extra time of prayer or devotion, an act of service, are you burdened by it? Is it hard? Have you stumbled? Have you struggled? If you have...well, Good! This part of the journey is supposed to be hard! This part of the journey is supposed to remind us of the struggles Jesus went through. If our sacrifice for these 40 days causes us just a little discomfort it serves

to remind us of the discomfort Jesus endures for us. If our extra effort causes us greater fatigue, it serves to remind us of the fatigue Jesus endures for us.

We are not supposed to take on the sin of the world. That has been accomplished once and for all time in the journey Jesus made from heavenly and holy to earthly and human; resisting temptation and remaining above sin so that the one who knew no sin became sin so that all of us might be redeemed. What we accomplish in lent is a remembrance of the reconciliation God intends for us through Jesus' journey not only to the cross, but also to resurrection. In our struggle to follow the footsteps of Jesus, we must always remember the cross, but we must never forget resurrection and the promise of eternal life secured not only in life and death but in the extraordinary act of God!

If you have struggled today, this week, this Lenten season, then today is a wonderful day for you! Today is a Sunday! There are 40 days in Lent but those 40 days do not include Sundays. Sundays are always intended to be mini-Easters. Sundays, even in Lent are set aside to remember the resurrection and the awesome power of God who reconciles us through death and overcomes it so that we might have eternal life! So if you have struggled today, go back to where you began the journey. Remember the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, far removed from the hustle and bustle of Tiberius and the judgment of the Pharisees; far removed from the political struggles with the Romans; far removed from the personal struggles of family. Remember the message from the Sermon on the Mount! Pray! Let your life be a continual conversation with our God who is willing, even eager to overcome death so that we might live! Pray! Trust that your prayers will be answered and your struggles will not go unnoticed!

In a sense, this is what the Apostle Paul is telling us in 2 Corinthians this morning. We are no longer people blindly wandering in the wilderness. We are a people with a purpose. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5: 21) Our purpose is to live! To experience life in abundance and to share that life with others! I believe this is the same purpose God was calling the first pilgrims to as He brought them into the promised land!

At the end of the journey to the promised land, the Hebrew people experienced the bread of life, the food they had known for 40 years for the last time! They enjoyed the comfort of God's incredible provision and when they went out the next morning and it was not there they must have been terrified. In Joshua's account, they celebrated the Passover, the remembrance of God's protection and provision, a meal where there is incredible evidence of Messiah present in the foods and in the actions. The next day they enjoyed the fruits of the land, the first fruits. They ate of the fullness of the land God had provided. Then they ate the manna from heaven no more.

Freedom is a frightening thing! In a sense it is liberating and life affirming, but in another sense it brings with it an awesome responsibility. In freedom we can no longer rely on the provision of others, but rather we accept the opportunity to rely on ourselves and to use the gifts we have been given to help others. Instead of receiving the bread of life as a provision from God, we become the bread of life, given by God as the righteousness of God to be shared with others. We are no longer bound to the worries of our own needs but we are set free to share all that has been given us with others!

This is exactly where the Gospel lesson intersects our Lenten journey this morning. The lesson is one of the most famous stories in all the Bible. The story of the Prodigal Son is so familiar we may think there is nothing new we can learn from it. As you think about it this morning, I invite you to keep an open mind. Perhaps the context of the story as it meets our journey through Lent will invite you, invite all of us into a new sense of understanding, a new sense of freedom.

Today we follow the footsteps of Jesus to a table, a place where He is about to share a meal with Pharisees. He has been invited in chapter 14 of Luke's gospel to come out and perhaps explain His mission and ministry. The Pharisees are expecting Him. They are inside waiting for Him. They are not expecting those who show up with Him! All the tax collectors and sinners come out to be near him, to hear what he has to say and the Pharisees are offended at their presence! They grumble because they consider the sinners as beneath them! They do not want to have anything to do with those who are less than them.

As Jesus observes their reaction He tells them a story. One of the things we should remember about good storytellers is that they have a picture in their mind they want to share with their audience. They use words to paint the images they have already created. As we begin to listen to Jesus story this morning, I think that perhaps while He enjoys the setting he is in, he sees another room, another table, another meal. I have attached a picture at the end of this message of the room where the Last Supper might have taken place. Even as Jesus gathers with Pharisees and sinners and tax collectors, I wonder if His mind does not move to this place, to the meal that will be eaten here. I wonder if He thinks ahead to a time when all are invited. Today the room appears stark and barren. Then it will be filled with all who are willing to receive the freedom He offers as the first fruit of New Life.

Jesus contrasts the Pharisees who want to represent themselves as close to God, always doing God's work and will with the tax collectors and sinners who have not yet heard the good news but are eager for a change and as he sits around the table with some of them grumbling he imagines a time when all will be welcome. There is much work to be done before His meal is ready, but how He longs for that time. It is in this context that He begins to tell his story this morning.

There was a father with two sons. One day the younger son came to the father and asked for his share of his inheritance. Upon hearing these words all at the table, sinners, Pharisees, tax collectors alike would have either laughed or gasped. Such a request was just not made. First, in Biblical Israel the father would decide and such a request would be considered extremely impertinent. It would have been almost always dismissed and likely punished. Honor thy father would have been the rule of the day! Second, the younger son would have been entitled to nothing in the way of inheritance. The father might have allowed him a stipend, a small income but the estate would have all gone to his older brother.

Never the less, this father honors his son's request. The sheer stupidity of the father in this instance would have captured the attention of the listeners immediately! This, no doubt being part of the intent of Jesus in telling the story, now he presses on. A few days later the younger son takes all that is his and leaves for a far off land. (I have attached a second photo today that shows a place called the Treasury.

It is located in Petra, Jordan. As you can see from the photo, it is a place of incredible beauty and appearance. The structure is massive and the detail unparalleled. You cannot see in the picture the long, narrow winding entrance into its location. You cannot see the steep rock cliffs highlighting the different and vibrant colors of the sandstone. You cannot appreciate the awe you experience as you wind your way through the narrow canyon that suddenly opens up to this incredible sight. You also cannot see the houses, cave dwellings, and city buildings on the other side of the mountain. You cannot begin to imagine from this photo the awesome feat of engineering that would have been required to complete such a city! Perhaps this is the far off land Jesus has in mind as He tells His story.)

As the young man makes his way through the narrow canyons and comes upon the beauty of this magnificent structure, perhaps he thinks he has found a place where he can spend his small fortune and find pleasure and happiness. What Jesus knows, what we do not yet know is that this place is all a mirage! The "Treasury" is really carved from the sandstone mountains, but it has no depth. It is an image intended to portray great wealth so as to throw bandits and thieves off the trail of the defenseless people who live on the other side of the mountain. What Jesus knows is that there is no wealth in this structure, but only a place of entrapment where a person without honorable purpose can squander their wealth in pursuit of that which does not exist.

A place similar to this is where the young brother goes. Here he spends all his fortune cavorting with people who also seek pleasure in the purposes of a world that does not really exist. Too late the young man realizes he has squandered his resources and has nothing left. Financial disaster is compounded by the problems existing in the community and suddenly he is in great need. At this point the Pharisees who are hearing the story are no doubt looking at the sinners across the table and pointing fingers thinking Jesus is talking to such as these; admonishing them that they should have been more careful with their resources. They had their chance to be faithful to God and to be rewarded by God. They should have been more like us! Their faithfulness is measured by what they have in the world!

Then the story takes an unexpected twist! The young man, after having been beaten down and broken, the sinner sees the error of his ways. He recognizes the benefit of being a part of his father's kingdom and wants to return home. The sinners at the table with Jesus perceive in this an invitation to do likewise. The Pharisees perceive this as folly. People who walk away from God give up their right to any future consideration!

Jesus confounds both groups in the next chapter of the story. The sinners assume the father might receive the son as a slave. The Pharisees assume the father will join the rest of the community in ridiculing the son and seeing to it that he receives his just desserts. Instead the father acts unpredictably again and runs to greet the son! The son asks for a job. The father gives him a robe! The son asks for a meal, the father gives him a life! The son seeks bread. The father reminds all that "People do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God!" The son seeks slavery. The father offers freedom!

The Pharisees are offended. The sinners are astounded! How can the father be so stupid; how can the father be so gracious. It is difficult for both groups to accept but it is the message Jesus offers in the

story. (There is a third picture today. This picture is of the wailing wall or western wall in Jerusalem. Here people come to repent of their sins. They gather on the Sabbath and move forward with their sins written on sheets of paper that they insert in the cracks of the wall. They leave their sins and their hopes there for God. This unburdening allows them to experience a freedom they might never have experienced.) Repentance is not a moving away from sin. Sin is always with us as we learn in Gen. 4 when God talks to Cain. Repentance is a moving toward God even in the presence of sin. The young man has sinned against God! What God wants him to know, what God wants us to know is that in turning toward God even in the midst of that sin there is forgiveness and reconciliation and life in abundance. Freedom affords us the opportunity to face that frightening reality and recognize in it that we do not deserve the fruit of the land but we rejoice in God's grace in allowing it. No longer do we receive an unknown gift. Now the gift is in our midst. The gift is the fruit of God's grace and it is available to all who will turn to Him!

The Pharisees struggle with this concept of great grace! They still want to cling to their superior position as God's servants. They believe that they have earned the right to judge others and condemn them for failing to follow God's law. I imagine Jesus sitting at the table with them calling to mind the events of His near future. He knows that there will come a time when these same people who are so willing to condemn sinners will also condemn Him. He knows their willingness to judge others will be transformed into a willingness to judge him. Even though they have never walked a step in His sandals, even though they have never sought to serve the needs of the poor, the lame, the blind, the oppressed, they will judge Him for his efforts to do so!

It is to these people Jesus tells the last part of the story. The older son, still at work in the fields comes home. While he is still in the distance he hears music and dancing! "What is going on," he wonders. A slave tells him of his brother's return and his father's reaction. The son becomes enraged. The Pharisees can empathize. How dare the father give so generously to a son who has disobeyed so blatantly! The older son refused to go in to the party! The Pharisees are right there with him. They want to shout from outside the building! They want to hurl accusations! They want to condemn the younger son.

This would have been the custom in Biblical Israel. When the younger son tried to return to the father, the entire community would have gathered as he entered the streets. They would have jeered and mocked him! They would have taunted him! They might have even hurled stones at him for his disobedience to his father! This was the reaction the older son expected. This was the reaction the Pharisees would have demanded!

I have attached a fourth picture this morning. It is a picture of the steps leading to Pilate's home. These are the same steps Jesus would have been led up the night before his crucifixion. Perhaps these steps, this image come to Jesus mind as he feels the rage and resentment on the part of the Pharisees. Perhaps he already hears their shouts of derision, the jeers and taunts. Perhaps he hears the shouts of the crowd, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

You see, Jesus comes to dinner with the Pharisees at their invitation. They believe they are the insiders and Jesus has to prove Himself to them. They believe they do not need further redemption. They have always tried to live according to God's law. They relate to the statement of the older son. I have worked like a slave for you for all these years. Where is my reward! They expect to be rewarded and recognized by Jesus for their faithful service. They perceive that the sinners sitting across from them are getting something for nothing, that they have not paid the price for their salvation as the Pharisees have. What they do not understand is that they too have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. The Apostle Paul tells us we are all sinners and not one of us is able to secure our own salvation. Those who are gathered as Pharisees do not understand this. They see the reward given by the father as being foolish because they do not perceive it as their reward also. They think the younger son gets something for nothing.

What they fail to recognize, what Jesus sees in his mind's eye in the parable is that this reward costs the father everything. All he has built, all he has worked for, all he has created and loved has been squandered on the desires of a world that offers no lasting value. The father offers everything to redeem the only thing that matters to him in this entire transaction. The father gives to the son out of love. He gives to both sons out of love. One squanders his resources the other fails to recognize them.

The older son would have nothing if it were not for the father. While he has worked for years, still he has worked at what his father has given him. He would not have had it had the father not created it. As we hear this story this morning it is easy for us to see ourselves as the younger son. We all want to be that one who comes to realize and accept God's grace. We want to receive from the father a robe and a ring as we humble ourselves before Him. Many times we are that one. Many times we do humble ourselves.

There are many times however when we are the older son, the Pharisee. There are many times when we sit comfortably inside our house, our sanctuary and look out at others in the world judging them. When we look at the person on welfare and lump that one in with others who seem to get something for nothing without knowing the story of the one, we are the older son. When we look at a person who has different colored skin from ours and a different accent and we see them receive social security even though they came to this country as an immigrant and we condemn them without knowing their story we are the older son. When we hold fast to what we have even in the moment we recognize that what we have hurts others we are the older son. When we claim our rights to keep all guns in spite of the increasing crimes committed with some of them because of our own selfish desires we are the older son.

There are arguments to be made for our rights and freedoms, but when we are so enslaved to our own wants and desires that we cannot see them infringe on the legitimate needs for safety for others we are the older son. We should not have to give up our freedoms but in freedom, we should be able to recognize that others are robbing all of us of the abundance of life by using that which God has given to harm His creation! Until we can all work together to love one another, we who are free may have to willingly curtail our freedoms so that one day all can be free.

The meal Jesus offers today invites all to the table. It does not exclude those who have squandered their fortune on dissolute living. It does not exclude those who did not grow up in the church or with a clear understanding of God's grace for them. It invites all of us. Just as the Hebrew people entered the land and experienced a new freedom in abundance, so God invites all of us to experience this new freedom by giving of ourselves for the One who gave everything for us. As we follow the footsteps of Jesus, this is the table we come to. This is the table to which all are invited. My prayer this week is that you will come! Amen!

Next Week: Scripture: John 12: 1-8. Message: *Following the Footsteps of Jesus to Bethany.* Once again we join Jesus at a table; a different table. Today He dines with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Lazarus has been raised from the dead! Mary anoints his head! Passover is near and everyone seems a bit on edge. How do you respond under stress? What does Jesus teach us about stress today? Come and Worship! Come and See!



