

*The Prodigal Revisited*

Shepherd's Grace Church

September 22, 2013

Luke 15: 10-32: <sup>11</sup>Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The 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. <sup>13</sup>A 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. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But 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! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" <sup>20</sup>So 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. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup>But 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. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup>"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But 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. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But 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.'" (Read also Jeremiah 4: 11-12, 22-28)

The words of Jeremiah this morning will leave many of us with a sense of dis-ease, discomfort, and or distress. Certainly we do not want the Lord to kindle anger against us. We do not want the Lord to abandon us; we do not want the Lord to forsake us. We might be inclined to cry out and beg Him to stay. We might shout, "We Repent" and turn once again, even if only for a short time to His glory and Honor! We might lament, "Lord, what have we done? What has caused you to turn your back on us; to withdraw your support from us?" I think the Israelites tried both these approaches. The problem was they could not sustain the first and they didn't like the answer to the second.

The Israelites only wanted to repent for their own benefit. They maintained their righteous posture for a time, but because they did not change their heart, they were not able to sustain their actions. When God told them what they had done, they could not believe the answers! In Isaiah 1 God lists the indictment against the Israelites. They had abandoned the poor, the widowed, the orphaned. They had failed to notice the work of others in their community. They were so concerned with their own work; with their own sense of self-righteous accomplishment they forgot that salvation was intended for the whole community and not just for the individual. They forgot that the worth of each person's ministry and each person's service was equal to the other's. They wanted to lift up their worth so God would notice and to put it in the way of this world, "To Hell with everybody else."

This morning as we reflect on the story of the Prodigal Son, I believe God is inviting us to learn, not only from the story of the prodigal, but also from the lessons of Jeremiah. I believe God is inviting us to look in the mirror and see ourselves and our own selfishness in our desire for salvation. Listen carefully as we revisit the prodigal. Examine your heart and ask yourself who you are in this story. Ask yourself what you might have to re-learn from the truth of God's grace. Return with me now to the days of the prodigal and listen as the prodigal himself invites you to hear, to think, to understand...

There was a father who had two sons; I am the younger of the two. I had been given everything as I was growing up. My mother and my father told me I could be anything I wanted to be. They told me I should never want for anything. They told me I could accomplish great things. I believed them. I believed that I had the world by the tail and that all I could see belonged to me!

As I was growing up, if I saw something I wanted, I went to my parents and they got it for me. As I was growing older, I had the nicest clothes, the largest home and the best of everything. The girls came around and showed interest in me and I knew I could have any one I chose. I believed I was entitled to all of it! I believed it all belonged to me and was for my use. I cared nothing for others except for what I could use them for.

My older brother was a nuisance to me. He represented all that I did not understand. He worked at my father's farm, at my father's business with a passion. He wanted to learn all the details of it. He was a disciple of all my father had to teach, to think, to do. He was constantly belittling me; telling me I was lazy and spoiled. He seemed to resent me for getting everything and working for nothing. I resented him for his relationship with my father, but more, for his constant nagging at me to be more like him! He knew the day and the hour of his call to his father's work and he made sure I knew how special he thought that was!

One day, I was particularly tired of my brother pushing at me to be more like him! I went to my father and demanded my part of the inheritance that would be mine. As I think back now, I cannot imagine my arrogance! I was the younger son. Even though my parents had given me everything as I was growing up; even though they told me I could have everything I ever wanted I now know I was entitled to nothing! As the younger son, I had no inheritance. Everything was to go to the first born. That is the way custom worked in our culture! I deserved nothing. I should have expected nothing, but because of my sense of entitlement, I asked!

Surprisingly to others, but not to me, my father gave me an equal share of his fortune with my brother. When my father divided his assets equally between the two of us, I could see the look of contempt on my brother's face! I could tell he believed I deserved nothing. I could feel his disdain for me. I could sense his sense of superiority. Because I didn't do things the same way he did them; because I didn't see things the same way he did, that somehow made him better than me!

I believed he would never change! I believed I had to leave, to turn away from him so I could live the kind of life I wanted to live. In a moment of anger and without careful consideration, I packed all I had, all my father had given me and I left! I went to a far off land, a place where the culture was different from ours. I went to a place where no one knew me and where the only friends I had were the ones I could buy. I believed I would have enough money to last me the rest of my life; I believed I could have anything I wanted. That was the promise I had always grown up with! That was the promise of my father's world. That was not the reality of the world I moved to.

As I traveled to my new world, a world I believed was created just for me, I met a man. He had many followers and as he walked through the land on his way to Jerusalem, he would often stop and teach them. One day, I listened to his teaching. He said, anyone who would follow me must take up his cross and leave behind his parents and family. I had done exactly that; or so I thought so I asked him, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

I had received an inheritance from my father. I was not entitled to that but he gave it to me. I thought perhaps I was due an inheritance from his Father as well. To my surprise, the man answered me. He said, keep the law. I assured him I had always done so. Then he said, "Go, sell all you have, give your money to the poor, then come and follow me." I went away disheartened. The possessions were all I had. They were my promise of happiness! How could I give up everything in exchange for an empty promise?

I squandered all my wealth on things I believed would bring me happiness! I bought clothes and food and friends. I bought women. I bought all the world told me I needed. Nothing I bought satisfied my desire to live. I always wanted more! I wanted more, and more, and more! Finally, I ran out of money. I looked around at my possessions. I sold them for what little I could and ran out of that money as well. I could no longer support my lavish lifestyle. I was thrown out of my room; my friends deserted me! The women left me! The world abandoned me!

There was a great famine that came over the land soon after this! I wandered the streets forced to beg for what meager scraps others would throw my way. Starving, smelling of the stench of the streets, clothes stained from sleeping in the filth around me, I tried to find work. I had never worked a day in my life and the only person who would hire me was a pig farmer. I worked in all the mess and manure of the pigs I had been taught to avoid for all of my life! The stink and the stench were beyond any smell I could have ever imagined!

Every day I carried fresh pods to the pigs. I placed the food in the trough and watched as they rutted and rooted for all they could get. Every day as I carried the food, I thought how good it would taste to

have even a little of what I was feeding the pigs! I was starving to death and I had nothing! No one gave me anything! No one cared about the poor little rich kid who had lost everything and was now destitute and dispatched to live a life of poverty!

Once, after having worked 18 straight hours in the field I was so overcome with fatigue and hunger that I passed out. I lay in the field for two days with no one coming to check on me. No one cared if I was alive or dead! When I woke I thought to myself, "My father has many hired hands. All of them have enough to eat and even more than that." I decided to get up and return to my father's home. I pledged to myself that I would make a full confession to him. I was determined to acknowledge my sin of arrogance and pledge to my father that I would, from that moment on, work for him, expecting nothing except the same wage which he paid his hired hands.

As I made the long journey back to my father's house, I met the same man I had encountered long ago. This time, he was just outside Jerusalem. He was riding down the path from the Mount of Olives on a donkey. The crowds had grown even larger than before and were chanting, "Hosanna." The word means save us now, and when I asked one of the leaders of the crowd about it they explained that he was the Messiah, the one who was sent by His Father to redeem the world! I watched as the Pharisees urged him to quiet the crowd and I heard him say, "If these were quiet, even the stones would speak!" I watched as he rode on into the city; into a triumphal welcome. Apparently the man had reached his destination. I wondered if he would be able to give up all his worldly possessions.

I walked on. I was still far from my father's house and still determined to confess my sins to my father and beg for his mercy. I walked and walked until far in the distance I could barely make out the vaguest of outlines of my childhood home. I started up the last great hill, thinking of all I had to say to my father and suddenly my father was there! He had seen me in the distance and come running to me. He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me! He kissed me on the cheek and tears were streaming down his face. My son! My son!, he exclaimed! We both sobbed in each other's arms and I heard him order one of his servants back to the house saying, "Quick! Bring a robe, the finest one you can find and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Kill the fattest calf and let us celebrate for this son of mine was lost and now is found! He was as good as dead and is now alive!"

I swallowed hard. It would have been easy for me in that moment to accept the sense of entitlement I had grown up with. I could have forgotten my pledge to confess my sins and accepted my father's gracious gifts but I had changed! I knew that I was entitled to nothing. I had everything and had given it all away! I could only hope for mercy. In that moment I opened my mouth to speak! All the servants stopped their activity and listened as I confessed my sins to my father.

Instead of rebuking me and accepting my offer to be treated as a servant, my father continued in his rejoicing, smiling even more broadly it seemed than before! We celebrated and we danced and we laughed the evening away.

At some point in the evening, my father was summoned outside. I stood at the window and watched as he made his way up the hill to engage my brother in a conversation. My brother argued with him and became quite animated in his conversation. My father tugged at his sleeve, begging him to come and

join the celebration but my brother continued to stand his ground. I watched as my father shed tears of frustration and sadness, and I watched as my brother turned away! He refused to come in. He refused to welcome me back. He refused to forgive.

The festival of Passover was upon us and as part of our heritage, my father and I made our way up to Jerusalem. As we entered the city we were caught up in a large crowd moving toward the edge of the city to witness a crucifixion. The crowd was so large we could not escape it and as we moved along with it we were witness to the one who was to be crucified. To my surprise, it was the man whom I had met twice before.

As He walked under the weight of the cross, I remembered the first words I heard him speak to his disciples; "Take up your cross and follow me!" He looked over at me as he bore the full weight of his cross. He had been beaten and battered and bloodied almost beyond recognition but he looked at me and he smiled. I did not understand the smile at the moment, but later I talked to one of his followers. That man told me that the crowds just a few days earlier had wanted to make him king! He told me that the man gave it all up to do the will of his father, to accomplish the purpose for which he had been sent. That man told me that the crucified man's name was Jesus and his mission was to save the poor wretched people of this world from their sin by offering himself in exchange for them.

In that moment, I remembered his words, "Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor and follow me!" I stood in awe of his willingness to do exactly the same for the poor of this world! I stood convicted of my sin and at the same time forgiven of it. I thought of my father's actions, of his willingness to overlook my sins and take me back. I recognized that my father took me back not because he had to but because he loved me! My father's love was my father's grace. The actions of this man were that same grace poured out, not only for me, but for all the world! In that moment I was forever changed, not because of the love of my father but because I recognized the love of a heavenly father who cared enough for each of us that he offered even His Only Son as an exchange for our lives.

The ring he placed on our finger that day was a symbol of his eternal covenant with us. The robe he placed around our shoulders was a white robe of righteousness. The sandals he placed on our feet were the sandals of ministry; sandals made for walking to the ends of the earth to share His great love for us!

I witnessed the crucifixion; heard the last words of the man and was shaken once more. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!" he exclaimed. With that he died and with that I remembered the actions of my father. He welcomed me wholly and completely, forgiving me without hesitation. He invited me to a love that was everything. I remembered the promises of my father and my mother that I could have everything in the world and in that moment, as I recognized my father's gift, as I recognized His Father's gift, I knew that everything was the gift of love that had always been mine, even when I was too arrogant to recognize it.

I returned home to try to make peace with my brother. I worked at the family farm and business and poured my soul into serving him and others. At every step he criticized my work. He struggled to accept my work and belittled my accomplishments. He thought his work was better than mine because he had

always been there and he had always been a servant to my father. He struggled at the possibility that I could have changed and that my commitment might have been a sign of true transformation.

Brothers and sisters, I do not know where you are in your relationship with others in the congregation today. I know that in this world there are those who claim to know the day and the hour of their acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Sometimes these people take on a sense of superiority over those who have struggled with their faith over a long period of time. This sense of competition can cause a division in the body of Christ.

Sometimes people in the Body will begin to believe that their ministries are more important than the ministries of others. They will begin to dictate and demand preferential treatment. They will even bully others because they can more clearly identify the relationship they have with God. The problem is that all the work of the Body is the work of God. There is no one work that is greater than others. Sometimes one project or effort will take priority over another because of the direction God has given, but that priority never overrides the priority of Love!

God recognizes that some of us have had a difficult journey to His promise. He knows our arrogance and our sense of entitlement and that we have sinned against Him and others! He knows how difficult it is to turn from our sin and accept the fullness of forgiveness.

God also recognizes that others try to Lord their faith over people. Almost incomprehensively, God brings both groups to the church. God calls them to work together and to recognize in the "other" that there are many ways to come to faith.

The older brother had been with the father always. Everything the father had was his. The younger brother came to the Father later. In God's eyes both are welcome, both are invited, both are encouraged to eternal life. Both are sinners saved by Grace. Neither did anything to deserve their father's love, but rather that love was given unconditionally!

Today we are called to examine this story. We are called to recognize that we have at times put ourselves and our needs above the needs of others. We are called to recognize that we have inflated our work over the work of others. We are called to recognize that we have belittled and berated the work of others even to make our own work seem more important.

Today we are also called to recognize that we have, at times been less than faithful to God's work but that God loves us still. Today, in this moment, let us remember Jesus last words on the cross. Let us forgive one another, let us put on our sandals and let us go out into the world to share God's great love with every one we meet!

Amen!