

Sermon, August 28, 2022
Luke 15: 11-32

“Who is the Prodigal Son”

Among other things, Jesus was a great storyteller, and used parables to get across the purpose and meaning of his ministry. They were told in a way that challenges us, the readers, to interpret them and discern the message they contain. The 15th chapter of Luke is made up of three different parables - today's, concerning the Prodigal Son, being the best known. All three of them have to do with something that was lost, but then found - the first about a lost sheep, the second, a lost coin, and then today's, a lost son. Today's goes deeper than the first two, and really points to the essence of the gospel itself. And, in the words of Henri Nouwen, “More than any other story in the Gospel, the parable of the prodigal son expresses the boundlessness of God's compassionate love.”

The story is broken into two parts, and contains three characters, two sons and a father. Each of them represents more than might be immediately apparent. We begin with the younger son asking for and receiving his inheritance early and then traveling to a distant land and squandering the money in dissolute living. He then falls into a wretched condition, and winds up with a job tending to pigs, which for a young Jewish fellow is about as low as you can get.

Obviously when Jesus is talking about things that are lost, he is asking us to consider our own spiritual state. If we see the father as symbolizing God in the story, we can see that the son traveling to a “distant country” speaks to the distance that we can also drift away from God.

Dissolute living is one way that we can create an apparent distance between ourselves and God, but not the only way. There are other temptations that can draw us away, there are sins of commission and omission, and sometimes just the business of our lives can lead us to lose sight of the presence of God in those lives. This may not lead us to a state of wretchedness, like the prodigal son, But Jesus later refers to him as one who was dead, not that he was physically dead, but spiritually so. We may not find ourselves in as drastic a condition, but any distance from God can lead to sense of spiritual emptiness.

Like with some alcoholics you sometimes have to hit rock bottom before seeking the help needed. The son certainly reached that point and decided he would go to his father and say. I “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands”. In other words, his intent was to make confession. , which is often the first step in closing the gap between us and God - and it can be a difficult step requiring some real soul searching. But like Paul says, we all fall short of the glory of God in some ways - ways in which we may not even be aware of. But then our conscience has a way

of sneaking up from behind us, and whispers in our ear, remember when you did this or that - remember the hurtful thing you said or did to another - remember things you did, or, perhaps, failed to do? But keep in mind that confession is really for your own benefit. You're not telling God anything that he is not already aware of, as much as you are releasing yourself of burdens you may carry from your past.

But then take note of the fact that the story says, "But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion...". As important as our act of confession is, it is preceded by that which we call the grace of God! In our spirit there may have been a vast distance between ourselves and God, but in God's grace that distance did not exist.

In the eighth chapter of Romans, we find what I find to be one of the most astonishing statements in the whole Bible. Paul writes, "But I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels or rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord". Jesus reveals to us the depths of the father's love. In Greek the word is agape, which can mean unconditional love.

In the later part of the story the elder brother is greatly upset by the wonderful treatment his younger is receiving upon his return. He says to his father, "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. But then this son of yours comes back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him." The Father has no problem with the elder son - he has followed all his commands. The message should be clear - we too may follow all of the commandments, but as Paul tells us, we are not reconciled to God by our good works, but through God's grace which we accept through faith. The younger brother was lost, but then he was found through the grace of God, as we all are. This does not mean that we are excused from doing good. It just changes our motivation. We don't do good to earn God's love, we do good out of gratitude for that love.

Now, there's one more thing that we should take note of. The father in the story, again, symbolizes God, but he also represents what we are supposed to do - that we must also look towards others with unconditional love. Being human, as we are, that is not all that easy to do, but in this parable that is what Jesus is calling us to strive for. Amen.

Let us pray: Loving God, we thank you for this day and all the blessings it holds. Help us to express our gratitude through all that we say and do. We thank you for the example that your Son Jesus sets before us through both word and deed. We confess that we are not always as faithful as we could be, and that we too are sometimes lost. Yet in your grace and unconditional love we are found wanting but are found and renewed. Lead us each day to walk in the power of that love, and to extend that love in our relationship with others. Help us to let go of the temptation to judge, reaching out, instead, with reconciling love. May we express our love for you through our love for others.

As always, we pray for those who are lost, for those who are sick, for those who sorrow and grieve, remembering to you...Amen.