

Sermon – 4th Lent
Luke 15:11-32
March 31, 2019
"A Man Had Two Sons...Or Did He?"

I title all my sermons but its one thing to create one, quite another for a title to tell you what the actual message is about. No title for a sermon on the story known as the Prodigal Son would ever do it justice, nor could it - there are too many story lines inside the story. Is it about a *'son who goes away'*, *'a son who maybe wished he'd gone away'*, or a *'Father who goes out of his way for them both'*? Is it about a family broken by sin, or simply a broken family? Could you title it *"A Boy Ran Away"*, *"A Brother is Run Out"* or *"Dad Takes up Running?"*

No matter what title you may give it, this story is the crescendo of three parables in Luke 15 about grace toward sinners, which is the furthest thing from the minds of the men who questioned Jesus' propensity to hang out with *"sinners and tax collectors"*! There is plenty to grumble about and grieve over from the selfish, even shocking behavior of people in this world. Yet a taller order for God may be saving the righteous, a fact that suggests another potential title for this story – *"A Man Had Two Sons Who Really Didn't Need Him."*

You see, both sons have terrible misconceptions of their father. If you've read this story, you know it is commonly thought of as a sibling rivalry, but it's much more than that. The boys, mirror opposites as they may seem, both assume their father is a hard man. Both could not be more wrong. When we read it, we gravitate, naturally, to *"who we resemble in the story."* I've played life pretty close to the vest for virtually all (well let's say most) of my 60 years. I was my mother's favorite. Even though I was a younger brother I have a soft spot in my heart for the older brother – too soft of course. He's a poor excuse for a son and a poorer excuse for an older sibling – spouting jealousy like he was a bubbler on a hot summer day.

But lest we put a ribbon around the neck of the younger brother, with whom I imagine a few of you might identify with – (I don't need a show of hands), take a moment to see how he and his estranged big brother are two religious peas in a pod. Sure, the little guy makes a mess of his life while "big bro" dutifully tends the farm and probably gives mom and dad a few grandkids.

But *"gosh I better come to my senses now that I've grown up"* little bro, while having an epiphany regarding the emptiness of a selfish life, is no more a true son of the Father than big bro back home. Desperation, which has elicited more than its fair share of "confessions" over the years, should not be confused with repentance. The boy went home because of his belly, not his heart. Coming to one's senses is not repentance - it's more an act of self-preservation. *"I gotta stop living like this"* is not necessarily the same as *"I gotta come clean with God."*

And so, to preserve what's left of his life – he concocts a plan to come back to dad and plead for a new living arrangement – as a hired hand. Which is precisely *not* what the father wants – he already has son who more or less thinks of himself that way. That's exactly the way the Pharisees who questioned Jesus thought of themselves. The prodigal son's plan is not only self-preservation, its self-deception. He thinks he can create a new relationship with his father on his own terms – he wants quite honestly to save himself. Grace may have been on his radar screen – but just so barely.

Counselors I think, call this “bargaining”. A person with a problem tries to bargain with it, an addiction for example, and live with it on new terms, whether better or not is highly debatable. There is no debating the prodigal bargained with his ruined relationship with his family by hatching a reunion plan that put him in the village with other day laborers. Nice sentiment we may think – but it doesn’t confront the issue. He might survive but he’ll never thrive, which is the real goal of grace. Hanging his hat in town meant two things – he would be earning his keep, which is exactly what Pharisees and far too many Christians assume we must do with God, and he’d never have to confront his brother.

But if the young man accepted the restored “son-ship” his *“running to him with bare legs exposed father”* was offering, he would have to ditch all pretenses to having anything to do with that restoration – AND – he’d have to take up life again with big bro. But that’s what distinguishes repentance from desperation or even contrition – repentance finally turns out to be the God given capacity to swallow pride and be treated far better than we deserve. The young guy’s sins were many – yours are too. Sin breaks a relationship with God which we are powerless to heal. Repentance is accepting that you don’t have to. God has. Romans 2:4 says *“Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance”*

In his explanation of the 6th petition of the Lord’s Prayer – *“lead us not into temptation”*, Luther says we ask in this prayer *“that God would watch over us and keep us, so that the devil, the world and our sinful self would not deceive us and draw us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins.”* The whole of Luke 15, about a shepherd with 100 sheep who loses 1, a woman with 10 coins who loses 1, culminating in the parable of a “father who had 2 sons” who loses...we’ll you tell me... shows how determined God is to answer that very prayer Jesus taught us to pray.

God suffers when even one of us is lost in sin, false belief, or despair. In God’s thinking there is no winning if we remain hidden or remote – and in God’s arithmetic one in a hundred is no less valuable than one in ten – or one in two, because it’s “the one” that matters – and you’re that one. No matter *“which one”* you are, you are *“that one”* toward whom the love of God is unyielding. AMEN