

3/27/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Leader: Holy One,
we seek you while you may be found.

People: We call upon you while you are near.

Leader: Have mercy on us, O God,
for our thoughts are not your thoughts
and our ways are not your ways.

People: Forgive us for thinking we deserve special treatment. Transform us by your unearned love.

Leader: As we walk with Christ on this Lenten journey,
let us see your way more clearly

All: *and follow your way more faithfully.*

Assurance of pardon (Psalm 32 adapted)

God, from our wandering and alienation, we have stumbled into your loving arms. From our pride and self-righteousness, we have watched and resented as others stumble into loving arms. Through the story of the prodigal son, the father, and the older brother, let us see your work of reconciliation.

Blessed are we whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

Blessed are we whose sins our God does not count against us.

God, we trust in your unfailing love that is without money and without cost. Let us rejoice and be glad!

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Gracious God, this morning we will hear again the story of the father who loved his two sons with a heart that sacrificed and broke for both of them. His love was unconventional, unconditional, and undeniable. He knew what they both wanted as well as what they both needed, and he showed both of them grace, mercy and restoration in their brokenness. God, we thank you for this story – we thank you for your love.

We thank you God for the rain that we've had recently, for the ways that has nurtured and brought growth and life to the earth, the crops, to all living things. Thank you for the spring peepers that can be heard in the evenings and the birds in the mornings as they sing and croak their praises loudly! Thank you for the ways the earth generates and regenerates life as it receives what it needs. We ask for wisdom and attentiveness, that we would learn from watching your creation and respond in ways that offer care and healing to the earth and all life.

We're grateful, God, for opportunities to learn. We thank you for teachers, for support staff, for all who make learning in school possible and enjoyable. Thank you for students, those who are

learning and formulating their ideas and identities. Be with those who teach and those who learn. Be present with your Spirit in the midst of this essential life-process and grant willing and cooperative hearts and minds. We pray especially for the girls in Afghanistan who were promised the opportunity to go to school and have now been denied. We pray for your comfort in their disappointment and for your courage as they continue to struggle in their desire to receive education.

God, as we come together to worship in a place of safety and comfort, we pray for your children around the world and much closer to home who do not have safe or comfortable places. We pray for those who've been uprooted, displaced from their homes because of fear, poverty, violence, war, greed... the reasons are complex and many. Give us hearts and minds that are compassionate and merciful, as we try to understand the circumstances that create places that are not safe. Help us then to act in ways that are consistent with our faith in you. Give us courage as we learn. Remind us, with your Holy Spirit, to always use Jesus as our measuring stick of what is good and safe and just.

We pray for those who are grieving. Especially for James Krehbiel and his family as they mourn the loss and celebrate the life of Julie. Be particularly close to their daughters at this time, God. May they feel your comfort and presence. Be with others who are feeling the loss of loved ones' presence here on this earth. Send your comfort and healing. We pray for your healing for other kinds of pain – for illness in our bodies and our minds. We acknowledge that you are our ultimate care-taker, God and we trust your Spirit's love for us, as it's shown through friends and family, doctors and others whose wisdom and expertise are gifts from you, for our good.

We offer our prayers to you in faith and trust as we say, together, the prayer that Jesus taught...

OFFERING PRAYER – We thank you, God, for all of your good gifts to us. We ask you to receive these gifts of money, along with the gifts of our time, our talents, our energy and passions – all of which have been given by you. Bless these gifts. May they honor and glorify you. Amen.

SERMON – PASTOR CALEB YODER

FROM ENTITLEMENT TO GENUINE RELATIONSHIP

Hopefully, that monologue helped drive home the level of harm the younger son's actions caused. You might even feel it's a little unrealistic; what parent would actually hand over half the estate like that? It seems foolish on the father's part. I think that's part of the point.

Maybe this brings up feelings or memories from your own family. Many farm families have considerable conflict somewhere in their history around issues of inheritance. These are painful wounds.

As far as I know, in most cultures, an inheritance is only divided and passed on to children after the father or parents are deceased. Ecuador is unusual in having the custom of passing on inheritance to children while the parent is still living.

The elderly couple pictured was part of the church plant I was involved with in Ecuador. They divided the land they worked hard for into five plots for each of their five children.

Compared to the large fields of Kansas, these plots were tiny, but they were gold for Nicolas and Victoria.

Their first loss came when a son went through a divorce and the ex-wife ended up with half of his plot. Then another grief came when a daughter sold the plot adjacent to her parent's house. Perhaps out of shame, she never talked to her parents about the plan. Nicolas and Victoria had to dismantle some outbuildings, lose a shade tree, and watch a tall wall go up beside their house.

In Jesus' day, there were rare cases of giving inheritance early, but without the rights to sell, as the prodigal son did. It was also not something a child could initiate or demand.

Kenneth Bailey interviewed people from multiple Middle Eastern cultures, and the reaction was almost unanimous: a son that makes this kind of request of his father is saying: "Dad, I wish you were dead."¹

What else can we observe about this parable that some have called the gospel within the gospel?

The most positive interpretation possible of the prodigal's intentions was that he hoped to gain a fortune and support his father in old age through that fortune. But instead, he squandered the money, and when a famine hit in the far-off country, he takes a job herding pigs. That's about as low as you can go if you are Jewish, by the way, because pigs are considered unclean animals.

The prodigal's plan was to return home and work as a hired servant of his father. Perhaps he thought he could in some way repay what he lost in that way.

"Make me as one of your hired servants," he plans to say. But when he arrives, the father shockingly runs to embrace him. The son leaves out the part about working as a hired hand. He has seen his father's extravagant compassion and knows he cannot earn his way back.

FATHER OF THE PARABLE

The father responds in shocking ways for the Middle Eastern context. He runs to greet the son, which violates all sense of decorum for an older man in that culture. The father gives new clothes to the son and throws a big banquet to celebrate his return, risking embarrassment with the villagers who would also be offended by the actions of the son.

Maybe Jesus' listeners would have been reminded of Jacob. Jacob thought he had lost his son Joseph, and told Joseph's brothers that if any harm came to the youngest Benjamin, "you will bring my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol" (44:29). It's a way of saying that Jacob's life will end in tragedy because of the loss of these two sons.

¹ Bailey, Kenneth E. *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983.

However, the story has an unexpected ending. Not only does Benjamin remain safe, Jacob learns that Joseph has been alive the whole time and has now reached a high position in Egypt. Ultimately Jacob can die in peace.

It likewise clearly means everything to the father of the parable to have his son back.

OLDER BROTHER

One detail that most interpreters miss is that the end of the parable shows as significant of a break in older brother's relationship with his father as there was when the younger brother left home.

The older brother is so upset at the celebration that he refuses to attend the banquet. In the Middle Eastern culture, this refusal would air the family dispute before the entire village of guests and subject his father to public humiliation.

The father pleads with his older son, calling him "*child*." – this pleading is the same word where we get Paraclete, one of the names of the Holy Spirit or Counselor.

Still the older son refuses. "All these years I served you." So in an ironic twist, the older son has made himself out to be a *servant* rather than a *child*. First it was the younger son saying "I'm not worthy to be called your child." Now it is ironically the older who also doesn't consider himself a son.

FATHER AS IMAGE OF GOD

Now Jesus' parable asks it's listeners to imagine a human family. The father figure is an earthly father, yet he at the same time, an image of God. I don't think Jesus expected listeners to imitate the father of the parable in every way. The actions of the father of the parable are exaggerated because that's what God is like.

As humans who don't have the infinite resources of God, it is not wrong for us to have some boundaries to protect ourselves from abuse. Nor is it to pretend like reconciliation and restoration are simple matters. They are not.

So I don't think the central point of the parable is to say we have to be like the father of the parable in every way, though his character is certainly inspiring.

Rather, at the heart of the message of the parable is this: *Don't make yourself into a gatekeeper of God's love. Don't presume to say who God can or cannot embrace.*

Remember that at the beginning of Luke 15, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were criticizing Jesus for eating with the "tax collectors and sinners." Jesus also told the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. These parables all reveal a God who is grieved by human sin and separateness from God, but will go to ridiculous lengths to receive us back. This is a God who is vulnerable – in the position of being wounded by human actions.

NOT ENTITLEMENT

What does this parable really call us to? I believe it is not only about God's character and love, but that it also dismantles entitlement, the idea that you somehow have earned the status that enjoy. Instead, there is only love, and living in the security of knowing you are loved.

Most of us construct our lives, and even our faith on a sense of entitlement. We say we believe in grace, but we struggle to actually believe it. Whatever your theology, we look for reasons to feel we are "OK" based on what we actually do and think.

Grace can feel too much like letting ourselves and others off the hook. Grace is a completely different logic than entitlement. We can spend a lifetime trying to learn the difference.

I used to think of grace like this: I figured God has a really high bar, like expecting a perfect batting average for 100 consecutive good pitches or expecting someone to run a mile in 3 minutes. It's simply impossible, yet God somehow is furious with us for not doing the impossible.

God never asks the impossible of us. "All have fallen short," Paul says, but not because we fail to do impossible feats. It is because we stay stuck in our wounds and resist genuine relationship of love.

Let's think about this on the terms of the parable.

The problem with the younger son is not that he failed to do the farm work because he was away. It isn't really even about the money. The problem is that he wished his father was as good as dead. He rejected that relationship.

The problem with the older son was also not that he failed to do the farm work well enough. The problem is that he turned the relationship with his family into transaction, and insisted on his entitlement. He thought he was entitled because of what he did, not because of who and whose he was.

He forgot he was a son, and instead made himself a "slave" who at least deserved a goat to celebrate with his friends. "But all I have is yours" the father replies.

It's as if to say, you could have celebrated at any time. God is puzzled when we say, "but I'm entitled to this privilege, to this outcome, to this thing." It's as if God wants to say, "you already belong. My love is already enough. What else do you need?"

The work of a lifetime is learning to give and receive a love that is unearned. We receive love that we don't earn and we learn to give love without expecting something in return.

CONCLUSION

You don't earn the status of being a beloved child by staying out of trouble, avoiding certain behaviors, being a good kid, getting good grades, excelling in sports or music, or going on to get a good job.

You are child because you are. It is the same with God. God's love allows us to run away and serve our own egos, and we also must make the choice to return. It seems simple, but we have to come back to this over the course of a lifetime.

Whether you see yourself in the son who ran away, in the dutiful and resentful son who stayed, or in the aggrieved father, come home. Loosen your grip on all your reasons for feeling entitled, deserving, or "good enough." Come home to the God who runs to us, kisses us, embraces us, and pleads with us. May you discover that genuine relationship that changes our relationships. May we reflect that same love ourselves.

QUESTIONS

1. What do the actions of the father of the parable after his son's incredible betrayal communicate to you about God's grace?
2. When in your life have you identified with either the prodigal son, the older son, or the father?
3. How do we learn to live by the logic of being beloved rather than being entitled?

BENEDICTION

From this time and place into whatever awaits, may you be transformed by the love of God that we cannot earn. May you let go of entitlement so that you can live into genuine relationship with God and with others. As you go, know that our God of the wilderness remains with you on the way.