

“God’s Lost and Found: The Parable of the Lost Son”

Luke 15:11-24

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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No other teaching of Jesus captures the heart or imagination more than this morning’s parable. Like MANY great stories, it contains elements of greed, envy, confession, celebration, forgiveness, bitterness, jealousy, and of course, love. Charles Dickens, the master story-teller HIMSELF, called it “The Greatest Story Ever Told” while Shakespeare alluded to it more than any other biblical account in his great plays. Part of its complexity is that there are actually THREE separate dramas going on in one, and we can find ourselves identifying with any one of them at different stages in our lives. One celebrated preacher has gone so far as to state that if we fail to recognize ourselves in these people, then we fail to recognize the LORD, HIMSELF.

This morning, we are presented with a younger sibling who’s had enough of the toil and dull routine of farm life. He’d grown tired of having to abide under his father’s authority and all the rules that came with it, making his comfortable home feel more like a prison camp. But even MORE, I’m convinced he was fed up with having to live in the shadow of his dutiful, more successful brother. Thus, in an effort to escape it all, he requests from his father his share of the property. Like many young people, part of him wants to discover his OWN life and lead it on his OWN terms- he yearned to get out into the world and explore it for himself. By encountering life with all its risks and dangers, he would discover not only the larger world that lay outside the confines of those four walls, but MORE IMPORTANTLY he would find out what he himself was made of and capable of achieving with his life. I’m convinced that had he never taken the risk AT ALL, he would have hated himself LATER in life, repeating over and over again, "If only I had gone when I had the chance, if only, if only..."

I suspect many of US can identify with the yearnings of this young man- I know I certainly do. After all, it’s not uncommon for younger persons to want to explore the world and, in the process, discover who they are and what they themselves are capable of achieving with their life. Isn’t that why so many young people, after having finished high school, look forward to going to college or joining the military- because it’s their first taste of freedom and the many new challenges and responsibilities that come with it. Years ago, when I was a carefree and confident twenty-year-old, I approached my parents and explained to them how I wanted to transfer from the large liberal university in New Jersey I was attending to enroll in ANOTHER school some three thousand miles away in Northern California to pursue my dream of becoming a minister- the scene that night at our kitchen table remains as vivid to me TODAY as it did a half-century ago. My mother was ADAMANT- “David, under no circumstance are we going to allow you to go out to California, and that’s final!” Of course, I knew her great fear was that something might happen to me so far away and she’d be powerless to do anything about it, or that she’d probably never see me except for maybe every couple of years- they were simply the real concerns of a loving, doting mother. But before I could get the next word out of my mouth, my father interjected, “Dorothy, if David wants to go to California in order to pursue his dream, then we are going to support him in his decision.” I don’t think I could have loved my dad any more than I did in that moment. He was giving me a vote of confidence and in a sense saying,

“David, even though we don’t completely understand what this new journey in your life is all about, we love you and trust you enough to give you our blessing.”

Three months later, I found myself on a jet plane, which I had never BEEN ON before, heading for a state I had never BEEN TO. I would remain in the San Francisco Bay area for the next twelve years, not only finishing college there but seminary as well. It was not only the most formative period of my life, but I developed a coterie of close friends who became as close to me as my immediate family was. We not only went through college together but we all attended seminary at the same time and for the past forty years, have faithfully served Presbyterian congregations ever since. Then twenty years ago--realizing how none of us was getting any younger--we made a covenant that we’d all get together for a week each year for the purpose of catching up and serving as a support group to one another. THIS year, it was everyone’s turn to meet here in Pittsburgh and so last month, they all flew in and even brought their wives with them- that week was one I don’t think any of us will ever forget.

However, in retrospect, I’m convinced the MOST IMPORTANT part of my education has NEVER been the schooling per se but the profound lessons I came to learn ABOUT MYSELF- lessons I might NOT have gleaned had I remained within the safety and security of my home in New Jersey. As a result of my years out there, I became more aware of some of my weaknesses but also my STRENGTHS- FOREMOST among them that I could ACHIEVE ANYTHING and GO ANYWHERE IN THIS WORLD WITHOUT FEAR so long as I believed that Christ was always beside me and that the Church as the Body of Christ would always be there to receive and welcome me in. Those are the kind of lessons one can never learn in a seminary classroom but only in the SCHOOL OF LIFE ITSELF!

What is MOST SURPRISING about this story is how the father—just as my OWN dad did so many years ago--bows to his son’s request. After all, how do you hand over so much money and responsibility to a son or daughter who still seems so young and immature, who demands his share of the inheritance- NOT after his father has DIED, but while he is STILL ALIVE. And yet, a case could be made that the father’s decision may not have been so foolish AFTER ALL but the height of PARENTAL WISDOM. He just may be shrewd enough to understand that to force his son to stay where he does not want to be presents the even GREATER risk of losing him ALTOGETHER.

That’s why I found a particular article in *The Atlantic* magazine a few years back so intriguing. It was entitled, “Why Parents Need to Let Their Children Fail” and it described in great detail the dangers of “overparenting”- overparenting being when parents prove to be TOO OVERPROTECTIVE of their children that they never learn to take responsibility for their own actions. Because they are never allowed to learn those lessons from taking risks and even experiencing FAILURE, their children may develop a sense of entitlement and never make a satisfactory transition into adulthood. Teachers tend to find that the ones who are happiest and most successful in their lives are those students who were ALLOWED to fail, who were HELD RESPONSIBLE for their missteps, and who were CHALLENGED to be the best people they could be in the face of their mistakes.

This philosophy was supported in an article I recently came across in *The Washington Post* entitled “I Let My 9-Year Old Ride the Subway Alone. I Got Labeled the ‘World’s Worst Mom.’” The author went on to describe how two Maryland parents trusted their kids—ages 10 and 6—to walk home from the park. The children got about halfway there when someone saw

them and called the cops. For this, the parents were visited by the police and child protective services. Without their parents' consent, their kids were interviewed at school and Child Protective Services even threatened to take their children away from them!

Now the mother who wrote that article certainly loves her kids and is foremost concerned about their safety. However, she's ALSO aware of the danger of feeling they have to provide security every time they leave the house. Yes, they have to be wary of strangers but the fact of the matter remains that child abduction is exceedingly RARE. According to the Department of Justice, as of 1999--the latest year for which they have statistics--the number of American children abducted was 115 out of a country where over 72 million children live under the age of 18. Sadly, she says, children are in far more danger of being abused, kidnapped or killed BY THEIR OWN PARENT than by any stranger on the street.

This attitude has even been supported by the head of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children who in an interview said, "We have been trying to debunk the myth of stranger danger," adding that the safest kids are the ones with SELF-CONFIDENCE, a capacity that can't be developed without SOME measure of personal freedom. To become street smart and self-reliant requires taking risks with one's children and allowing them the opportunity to do things on their own. Of course every parent has to decide where to draw the line between providing for their security, on the one hand, and allowing them enough individual freedom, on the other. However, I believe the lesson here is that there has to be a reasonable balance between the two, that it can be just as much an error by being OVER-PROTECTIVE as it is allowing TOO-MUCH FREEDOM for their children and thus never allowing them the opportunity to discover the world for themselves and all their capabilities in the process.

It is a fact that risks come in ALL stages of life and there is no insurance policy in all the world that can insulate anyone from them. I believe OUR RESPONSIBILITY AS PARENTS is to stand and wait in the wings in the event we are ever called upon to help should they ever show up at our door bruised or injured. I found this most eloquently expressed in a book of devotions I have and one PARTICULAR reading entitled "I Hold the Bandages and Ointments Ready" contributed by the South African writer Alan Paton, the author of the classic novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. It goes:

*I see my son is wearing long trousers, I tremble at this;
I see he goes forward confidently, he does not know so fully his own gentleness.
Go forward, eager and reverent child, see here I begin to take my hands away from you,
I shall see you walk careless on the edges of the precipice, but if you wish, you shall hear
no word come out of me;
My whole soul will be sick with apprehension, but I shall not disobey you.
Life sees you coming, she sees you come with assurance towards her,
She lies in wait for you, she cannot but hurt you;
Go forward, go forward, I hold the bandages and ointments ready,
And if you would go elsewhere and lie alone with your wounds, why I shall not intrude
upon you,
If you would seek the help of some other person, I shall not come forcing myself upon
you.
If you should fall into sin, innocent one, that is the way of this pilgrimage;
Struggle against it, not for one fraction of a moment concede its dominion.*

*It will occasion you grief and sorrow, it will torment you,
But hate not God, nor turn from Him in shame or self-reproach;
He has seen many such, His compassion is as great as His Creation.
Be tempted and fall and return, return and be tempted and fall
A thousand times and a thousand, even to a thousand thousand.
For out of this tribulation there comes a peace, deep in the soul, and surer than any
dream...*

And so in answer to our earlier question as to whether the father was a fool for acceding to his son's demands, I think he felt he had raised and taught his children to the best of his ability and then had to leave the rest, INCLUDING their futures, in GOD'S hands. He could do no more than give him the freedom he so craved- whether to rise or fall, succeed or fail on his own, all the while holding "the bandages and ointments ready" in the event he was ever needed by him.

Thus we're told that his younger son gathered together everything he had and journeyed to a "far country." More than an actual place, you might say that this "far country" REALLY describes a CONDITION OF THE SOUL. As St. Augustine once put it, "A DARKENED HEART is the far country for it is not by our feet but by our AFFECTIONS that we either leave Thee or return unto Thee." For some, that far country may be a rejection of home and with it, their faith and all those loving relationships that sustained the person there. For others, that far country may be experimenting with drugs or surrendering to alcohol or perhaps abandoning oneself to all forms of pleasure and sensuality. In the case of our young friend, it meant traveling as far and as fast as his feet would take him. However, WHEREVER it was, he soon found himself impoverished there for as Jesus tells us, he squandered his property "in loose living." Just what it is he did to waste his share of his inheritance we're not told.

Of course, the irony here is that he left home because he wanted to be free but once he RECEIVED his freedom, it turned out to be his WORST PRISON. With no one to give him any more orders or responsibilities and now free to indulge in all manner of pleasures and diversions, he felt liberated- or so he THOUGHT. He resembles the athlete who the moment he signs a large contract, begins splurging on fancy cars and large mansions, on expensive restaurants and fancy nightclubs, until one day he wakes up to the news that his fortune is gone, that he's squandered every bit of it. In the final analysis, the promise of perfect freedom was actually a LIE so that instead of happiness and fulfillment, he has been left empty, bitter, and broke.

With nothing to eat, he is now SO poor and hungry that he seeks work as a hired servant who is then sent into the fields to feed swine, the LAST job any self-respecting Jew would undertake. Still, his hunger is such that he would have GLADLY devoured the food that pigs themselves eat. Thus one minute, he was "the master of his fate and the captain of his soul" but then just as quickly--after losing EVERYTHING he owned including his PERSONAL DIGNITY--he now finds himself attached to a WHOLE NEW master.

That's when we're told he "came to himself." In other words, he saw himself as he TRULY WAS. He now realizes just how shallow the life he had aspired to was, and how rich he had it when he had lived under his father's roof, that life WITHOUT the Father was in fact NO LIFE AT ALL! There isn't a more PIVOTAL and at the same time GLORIOUS moment in a person's life than when one "COMES TO HIM OR HERSELF!" Such moments in life are always a time of decision, just as we see it was for the younger brother. But that decision for him wasn't to reform himself and start making smart decisions instead of self-destructive ones,

nor was it to resolve going to church while attending multiple Bible studies and prayer meetings throughout the week. No, it is all about HIS RELATIONSHIP TO HIS FATHER. He was determined now to return home and confront his father and confess to him the plain truth about himself. He's going to admit that he has sinned before God and him, and FURTHERMORE, that he has forfeited any right to be his son and would be content from then on merely being a servant in his father's quarters.

When at last he arrives at the driveway of his home, we're told his father sees him. His love for his son was such that every minute he was gone, he had one eye positioned at the end of that driveway, waiting in anticipation for the day he would return- and that day had gloriously arrived. He had been "holding the bandages and ointments ready" THE ENTIRE TIME and was now prepared to administer them to his wounds, whether those wounds were of a physical, emotional, or even of a spiritual nature. In his overwhelming joy, he runs to welcome him. Now this was a major cultural taboo as it was dishonorable for ANY father to run after his son. Yet he is willing to put all social convention aside for it was more important for him to RECONCILE himself with this son whom he loves. Where we would expect the son to fall to the ground and begin kissing his FATHER'S feet, here it is the OTHER way around. Before the son can even get his prepared speech out of his mouth, the father has already ordered that the servants bring the best robe, put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet, and then kill the fatted calf that had been reserved for special occasions for his son- he who had been dead and is now ALIVE, was lost but now is FOUND.

What is important to understand here is that the young son's reception was NOT the result of anything HE had done. Rather, it was solely THE GIFT OF THE FATHER, nothing less than THE MIRACLE OF GOD'S LOVE and no other. Repentance is a RESPONSE to God's grace, not a prerequisite for it; grace ALWAYS comes first. The fact he decides to return home in the FIRST place is because he knows what a loving father he has. Any OTHER parent might have folded his arms and said in a voice dripping with self-righteous contempt, "I told you so! I said to you from day one that if you ever tried to leave, you would fail and find yourself crawling back home like some miserable dog" but not THIS one. As we saw in the first and second parables, God is always in search of that which is lost and when he DOES find it, he rejoices and celebrates over its recovery. And so the REAL theme of this story is not the son who becomes LOST but rather THE FATHER WHO FINDS US, not the faithlessness of HUMAN BEINGS but THE UNENDING FAITHFULNESS OF OUR GOD!

In conclusion, our story reminds us how we all need love and forgiveness and reconciliation JUST AS MUCH AS WE DO such physical needs as breathing or food or sleep- and that's EXACTLY what God OFFERS US. In a radio broadcast back in 1948, C.S. Lewis pointed out that the problem with humanity is not that our desires are TOO STRONG, but that our desires are TOO WEAK- we are far too easily pleased. We settle for mere trifles like money and sex and glory when God wants to give us TRUE wealth- love and intimacy with himself. We were not made for the far country, HOWEVER enticing it may be. The fact is we aren't pigs nor are we hired hands- we are SONS AND DAUGHTERS, and the lesson for us this morning is that as children of God and as brothers and sisters to Jesus Christ, we dare not settle for ANYTHING LESS. Let us pray...

Good and gracious God, help US to come to ourselves. Help US to return to your love. Help US to see your great tenderness coming towards us. Help US to know that you have already fitted

us for the robe and for the ring, and help US to smell the fatted calf of your great forgiveness for us. Lord God, help each person who hears this story see him or herself in it and know that it is always possible to return home to your great love for us. All this we ask in your name and through the mercy and love of your son Jesus. Amen.