

Date 2013-06-16

The Prodigal Son Sermon
West Valley Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Kim Engelmann

Everyone take out your Bibles or phones.

Today I am going to delve into the actual scripture text in a little more depth, and we will be doing this all summer long.

The reason we are doing familiar Bible stories (some of you might not be familiar and that is fine) is so that many of you don't have to learn the story for the first time.

When a story is familiar to you, you can go a little deeper.

You can go beneath the surface and begin to see connections and meaning that go beyond just the story line.

It might be a good idea to bring your Bibles with you this summer!

The first thing I want to say to you is that it is very important as we go through these favorite stories of the Bible this summer is that you be willing to look at them from different vantage points until you can see yourself in them.

So for example when my kids were very young I would put them in front of the mirror. And at first they were too little to realize that the little baby face reflected in the glass was really them. It was pleasant enough for them to see the figure in the mirror looking back at them smiling, cooing or waving. They liked that...as much as we might like to hear a familiar Bible story.

But it wasn't until they matured a little more that they suddenly realized as they looked in the glass that, "Hey! That's me in there! That's a reflection of who I am!" And when they did a whole new way of knowing themselves opened up for them.

I want us to mature in our reading of scripture so that we can start to identify ourselves with what is going on in the text, see ourselves in it....and I believe when we are willing to do that, it

is a sign of spiritual maturity, as well as a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work, using scripture to feed us.

When we can look at characters in these stories and say “That’s me in there”....scripture suddenly becomes relevant. It becomes more than just a nice story that’s pleasant to hear... rather the story becomes instructive, meaningful, and life giving for us....

Now I asked you a question 5 years ago when I first came to WVPC – I did a sermon on this passage then...and I asked you what the word “PRODIGAL” meant.

Anyone remember the answer? Anyone remember what this word means?

(BTW Jesus never uses the word PRODIGAL...someone decided to name it this – tradition assigned this name to this passage - and so the title “The Prodigal Son” stuck).

But Prodigal does not mean rebellious, or disrespectful. Rather, it means wasteful, lavish, unrestrained, copious. And...I told you then – 5 years ago – I am sure you all remember - that Lloyd Ogilvie, famous Presbyterian Pastor at Hollywood Pres.... didn’t call this passage the Prodigal Son at all. He titled this passage of Scripture the Prodigal Father.

Because he believed Jesus told this story not to emphasize how wasteful and lavish the younger son was in his wild expenditures and loose living.

Ogilvie believed instead that Jesus told this story to illustrate what kind of God we worship – that God is a PRODIGAL GOD, a PRODIGAL FATHER – lavish in his love, and unrestrained in his forgiveness.

I tend to agree as do the Bible commentators for the most part. I would have preferred that tradition call this story, the story of the Prodigal Father.

So with this in mind, let's look at LUKE 15:11-32 I hope you have it now in front of you on some device or in those old fashioned things called books...- and we're walking through the text of this story this morning...

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them.'"

Lets stop right there...

Now the first thing you notice here is that this son does an outrageous thing.

He asks his rather wealthy father for his inheritance...this inheritance was not usually given until after a parent died...So the younger son is actually saying...

"Dad...You are dead to me...its only your money that I want...the perks of our relationship. Not the relationship itself."

The father didn't have to hand anything over to the younger son. The law of inheritance in the code of Mishnah said that a father and only a father could initiate dividing up the inheritance. This is because the Jews were concerned that a man would not be taken care of in his old age, if the inheritance was given early.

Again, asking for the inheritance before a father died, for Jewish people was the same as saying "Dad, you are dead to me." It was an extreme sign of disrespect, and the dismay and shock of the crowd as Jesus said this to them is often lost to us today. We don't realize what a slap in the face for the father that was in that culture.

And still this father....this prodigal father, divided the inheritance between his sons; 1/3 of everything went to the younger son....2/3 to the older son.

Technically in Jewish culture the older son should have acted as a mediator - told the younger son he was out of his mind to

ask for his inheritance before the father died, and refused to receive the 2/3 inheritance. So for the crowd listening to Jesus, the older sons silence speaks louder than words...and so the older son is a bad guy from the beginning.

Both sons are lost but in a different way.

So again, even though it was an outrageous unheard of thing to do...most parents would never do this in the ancient world – this prodigal father – gives/divides his inheritance between his two sons – because the younger son asked for it.

This was probably a great deal of money because we get the sense from this scripture that the father was a noble gentleman type; a man who was well established financially: R's (**IMAGE OF Rembrandts painting**), painting picks this up with the rich cloth his Dad and brother are wearing. This family had a great deal of money and we also see this at the end of the story when the father kills the fatted calf – only very rich people would have a fattened calf back then. So lets read on...

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.”

So often it is our need that drives us back to God, after we have gone into a far country. Ever notice that?

I don't know what your far country from God is today. You know what you do that separates you from God...I don't know what it is...but each of us has our own far country that we go to...

My far country is that I turn negative, and say things to people that I don't mean.

My kids will say “Moms in a bad mood,” and the room I’m in just empties out real fast.:

Whatever that far country from God is for you...let me just tell you that the far country most alluring in our more vulnerable moments;

when we’ve been hurt and we decide that we can’t forgive anymore – the far country away from God and into bitterness beckons,

when we’ve been betrayed and we decide we can’t love anymore, we can easily be tempted to leave the scene for the far country

when we decide to stop a difficult relationship or give up on a person because we conclude that it’s just too hard to work at it any more, the far country seems like gold

when we lose hope in a calling from God because too many people have shot us down... that’s when that brochure of the FAR COUNTRY – away from it all – looks like heaven itself...

The far country is where we say “good... I am finally free of all those constraints, and should and should not’s...the restrictions of the Father...I am going to do what I want to do... going to spend the inheritance of my life – the life God has given me – the way I want to spend it...”

The FAR COUNTRY seems like freedom for awhile, until the consequences of our separation from God begin to show themselves in a kind of slow starvation.

In every case...when we live for ourselves....we begin to be in want...in need.

When 911 happened I was at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. And the line of people the Sunday after it happened, trying to get into the sanctuary, stretched down the street.

People's need and sense of helplessness drove them to church. For a short time people came to their senses. They knew they needed God. When someone has a need, and is confronted with their helplessness to meet that need...often it drives them back to God.

This is what happened to the younger son. He wanted to be free from his father...and instead he becomes a slave to a gentile...

“So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.”

Jesus emphasizes great hunger here...

Have you ever been really hungry? I mean just needing to eat? I hate lima beans...(IMAGE) can't stand them. They taste like sawdust. I don't get why God created lima beans....

But I remember....once being so hungry...that when I walked into the kitchen and saw someone cooking lima beans they looked wonderful to me! I couldn't wait to have a bowl full!

Now feeding pigs and wanting to eat their food is pretty disgusting for us to think about, but just imagine what it must have been like for a good Jewish boy.

The epitome of disgust for the people Jesus was talking to anyway....

....

And then we have six words at the beginning of verse 17 that I have seen played out in people's lives over and over again when they hit bottom...when they are in the pigpen of life....when they have lost everything....it says in verse 17...

“When he came to his senses” he realized who he was and whom he belonged to.

Why is it that sometimes we have to lose everything
Before we come to our senses? It would be so great if we
didn't have to go so low before we recognized our need for
God.

Is there something that you need to come to your senses about
today?

Is there something that is keeping you from seeing a reality
you need to take hold of?

Maybe you've felt a call from God and ignored it...and God is
saying pay attention

Maybe you need to ask someone for forgiveness and up to now
its just been too hard...and God is saying...I did it for you... do
it for them

Maybe things are going wrong in your life and you need to take
some steps to change the course of things and it means a
sacrifice...but it is necessary

Maybe you just can't fathom how you will pick yourself up
again...because life isn't fair...but God says get up...do not be
afraid...I am with you

I suppose the son could have stayed with the pigs in the
pigpen

He could have decided that it was easier to stay there, stuck in
the muck, than get up, turn around, go back home, and face
his father

You have to give this younger son credit...once he came to his
senses....he had the courage to go home again

He believed that he could still change his life; he could dream
a little...just a little about how he might not die...how he might
just be saved

He was willing to confess, repent and be a slave to his father...
in order to live...he was willing to pay the price...get humble,
get real, stop pretending and start doing something sane and
responsible to turn things around.....instead of dying unknown
and unloved in a far country

He came to his senses and realized who he was

A child of his father.... in a distant land,a far country where no one knew him...and no one gave him anything...being alone in a distant land is a desolate place to be

I still remember when I had lost my wallet and I had a replacement debit card and license and Julie and I were in San Diego and I had gone there thinking that...I could get a hotel room with my replacement card by paying cash...the only card I had on me.

Unfortunately, when I tried to use it to get cash at the ATM the card didn't work.

They hadn't coded it right or something...

Please, I told the person at the front desk. My husband is coming down...could you give us a room and we will pay you in the morning?

No way.

It didn't work.

We went to five hotels.

No one would trust us.

No one knew us - or cared. No one would give us anything

And I got homesick for my own bed

My neighborhood, community where people knew me

Where I was trusted and known...finally after making a huge stink after about five hours they gave up on me and gave me a room...but it was a scary desolate experience

In a far country, where no one gives him anything....the younger son comes to his senses in the pigpen!

'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my Father and say to him: Father I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

Ever do that? You're kind of nervous about a situation...

So you sort of rehearse ahead of time what you are going to say to someone

Kind of get prepared, choose the right words, make sure it sounds OK

In the same way the younger son rehearses – probably with a great deal of fear

And then, with this well rehearsed confession under his belt, he starts on his journey home

“He got up and went to his father”

And I want all of you to know today that

No matter what you’ve done, no matter where you’ve been
No matter what brokenness or sin is in your life; no matter how many times you have messed up, or gone to a distant country

You can always come home again, you can always get up and go home to your Father

You’re never in a far a country, that is so far away, that God is not eagerly waiting for you to turn around and come home again arrival

In fact look at this...verse20...

“But while he (the younger son) was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

Luke 15:20

Why would the father see the son, while the son was still a long way off?

It’s because he hadn’t been just passively waiting; he’d been eagerly looking for him...scanning the horizon

Lifting his head up countless times during each day

Hoping against hope that maybe, just maybe, he would see his son ...coming home again...

And one day...he looks up...and he sees this ragged, dirty, hunched over figure

Way way off, weary from the journey, stumbling towards him, in the heat of the day, filthy, weak and exhausted...

In those days it was very undignified for an older man to run
But this prodigal father doesn't care
He hitches up his robes and breaks into a sprint
He meets his son before his son even gets near to his door
Cause he'd been waiting for this moment
And couldn't wait any longer....
He'd been scanning the horizon and the moment of reunion
had finally come

The slightest turn we make towards God
The simplest prayer of surrender...of repentance...
We will find that God meets us 99 percent of the way....right
where we are

And the son launches into his well rehearsed confession; he
said it just like he'd practiced...he knew his lines well...he must
have felt so stupid just standing there in rags....inheritance
spent...smelling like a pig...
I am sure he couldn't meet the Father's eyes....

**“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am
no longer worthy to be called your son.”**

It's like the prodigal father doesn't even hear him
Doesn't even respond to this well rehearsed well articulated
confession...
Instead he says...

**“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on
his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf
and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of
mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.
So they began to celebrate.”**

You see the father...this prodigal father...is far more interested
in reminding the son who he is....by virtue of who he belongs
to...than whether he is worthy or not..No one is worthy in
God's eyes

But if the son can understand who he belongs to...and that his identity is based in his relationship to the Father, it is time to have a party...

The father puts a ring (IMAGE OF A RING) on his sons finger because

The ring symbolized kinship ties with the father that could never be broken - The ring said..."**RING: This is who you are...you are my child.**"

Sandals (IMAGE OF SANDALS)symbolized that no...his child was not a slave or a hired servant

Because Slaves didn't have shoes

Rather, in his father's house, as his father's child he was truly free and slave to no one. **SANDALS: This is who you are...as my child...you are a free person...**

But this is not the end of the story...although it might seem like a good place to end

There was another son...an older son...older kids tend in families to be "good" children

Usually older children in families become pastors - like me Grew up taking care of my younger sister 8 years my junior...I was a pretty good kid...older children usually are...they... grow up caring for others, doing the right thing, being responsible

Some of us have never really rebelled against God the way the younger son did; we've been good church going responsible people

We've never had a come to Jesus moment when we've been miraculously delivered from drugs, or prostitution or alcohol We've been, well...decent folks

Well behaved...kind of like the older brother...

But this kind of way of life can breed a kind of judgmentalism towards other

You can see it in the picture (SHOW REMBRANDT) of the older brother

It creeps in sometimes before we even know it is there...

Let's read on....

“Meanwhile the older son was in the field. (working hard! Being responsible) When he came near the house he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come home, he replied and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.

The older brother became angry and refused to go in.

So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who had squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’”

First off, in that culture, this prodigal father dishonors himself, by leaving the party as the host (you weren't supposed to do that back then)

Not only that...he goes out to plead with his older son ...the responsible one...the good one...begging him to be happy...to have joy...

Fathers didn't plead with their sons back then...they told them what to do and the son obeyed

But this Father pleads, begs his older son to come to *his* senses

You can also see how this older son disowns his brother by saying “this son of yours”

And clearly has a self righteous perspective on his having to “earn” his father's favor by never disobeying any of his “orders”

I think the words of the older son broke this prodigal father's heart

Just as much as when the younger son left home

Because the older son identifies himself as a slave in this passage

(It mirrors when the younger son asks to be treated as a servant)

And neither one of them fully apprehend the unconditional love

Of the prodigal father...that we don't earn...we don't deserve... that this is a relationship of grace....and its only when we receive God's grace that we can be gracious to others...go into the party....receive others freely as God has received us...

I know for myself that I have both of these two sons in me...I have hit bottom in my life like the younger son...

And I had to come home again...it's a dramatic story and I've shared that with you

But more subtle in me...and far more pervasive over time....is the elder brother

One who is judgmental, who stands at a distance from others' pain...who has tried to do the "right" thing for so long that it becomes more about what I am doing than who God IS....

(SHOW REMBRANDT PICTURE HERE)

And that's when I need to ask myself...

Can the elder brother in me come home to the unconditional love of the prodigal father?

Its SO difficult for me...when I have messed up yes God's forgiveness is there..and I get that.

But when I have done so much for God... ..always been a good Christian...faithfully served ...it is easy to stand in judgment of those who haven't been as good as me...

Who don't know the Bible as well as me...

Who don't live the Christian life as they should...

And on and on...

One question I always ask myself as I do ministry here with you is this...

Is our church more like the elder brother, or the prodigal father? And its probably a little of both....

Sometimes the church can seem to those who are hurting and broken
To be more like the representation of the elder brother than
the embodiment of the prodigal father
The church is seen by those on the outside, sometimes as
more of a judgment hall
Than a hospital for sinners...
And the father pleads with the elder son....in all of us and says

“My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. (literally this is true because the inheritance had already been divided) **But we had to celebrate and be glad, because *this brother of yours*** (see how he tries to reconcile the two of them?) **was dead** (to me...by taking the inheritance)**and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”**

Its touching because when this prodigal father says, "My son."
It's even more
tender than it seems.
The Greek word for son is not the word Jesus uses in this story.
To the irate older brother who refuses to go into the party Jesus uses the word teknon. "My child" he says to the older son. "My little one."
"You are always at home with me, and everything I have is yours."
Remember the younger son took his
share. Now everything that's left is the older boys.
This father pays an enormous price to extend grace to his lost,
blind, self-righteous, angry, selfish son.

"My son, do you not realize to live at home with me, to
exchange love with me, to share all things with
me, to walk together through life...these are the greatest gifts I
have to give. What I have been offering
you all these years is not the land, not the house, not the
money, not the clothes, not the ring, not the calf.
It's me. It's me."

This father is infinitely gracious and yet infinitely firm. He will not apologize. He will not stop the party.

The elder son is not allowed that power.

Not that one.

The father will plead with the older son to join. He will do anything. But not that.

"This brother of yours was lost and is found. This brother of yours."

Not "this son of mine." "This brother of yours. You're still family. It's not too late. You can still live as my beloved son.

For a long time I lived in sorrow over a lost son. Now that I have him back, must I lose another?"

There is silence. The father looks into the eyes of this older brother. What does he see? Anger or confusion or sorrow? We don't know.

All Jesus' listeners stand in rapt silence of this extraordinary story of one son who was lost and came home and another son who stayed home and was even more lost and this incredible confrontation with this unbelievably gracious and yet firm father.

The father says,

"But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

What does that elder brother do?

Everyone of Jesus' listeners wants to know

But then Jesus walks away.

Never finishes the story...and it's not because Jesus couldn't think up a good ending...

It's because the ending would have to be written by us.

Cause it's really about me. Really about you.

It will end in one of two ways. Either the elder brother turns away from his father, returns to the field,

works in coldness and bitterness of heart, and never goes into the house again. Does his work, follows the rules, tows the line, and grows to hate his brother.

That spirit of pride and superiority and anger and complaint gets a little stronger and a little darker in him every year.

Or maybe it ends like this.

Then the elder brother fell to his knees. His hard heart was broken, and he began to weep before his father. He begged his dad to forgive him, take him back again.

Then he went into the house, and he saw there the small wasted figure of his younger brother.

And he remembered how they grew up together and played and fought and worked and loved each other and how he thought his brother had been forever lost to him.

But now they would never again be apart. His heart exploded with love, and he threw his arms around his brother, and he would not let go.

He joined in the celebration, and he laughed louder, and he sang longer, and he danced faster, and he cried harder than anybody else.

The celebration goes on to this day.

How does the story end for you?

Heavenly Father, You know about our hearts. You know what a subtle force sin is, lostness is, blindness is. God, would You help us? Whoever You're calling to repent today, whatever it is in our hearts that needs to get cleaned up, if we are in a far country would you help us to come to our senses. Forgive us Lord. Would You help all of us elder brothers to come home to You too? To replace judgment with

joy, criticism with forgiveness, anger with peace...and help us to go into the party. Allow grace to triumph in all of us and in this church day by day by day by day ... We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.