

**SLD03.18.07 Fourth Lent**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32.**  
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### **The Parable of the Loving Father**

Our sermon text this morning is from the 15 chapter of Luke, verses 1-3 and 11-32.

Let me set the stage for the story we will hear. Jesus has been invited to join some Pharisees for a sabbath meal. During the course of the dinner, he tells a number of stories, stories which make the host and other guests feel a little uncomfortable, because each tale holds some little barb, some little jab or jolting reinterpretation of the rules by which the Pharisees live. One story raises the touchy subject of healing on the sabbath. Another talks about sharing meals with undesirables. Still another addresses the importance of regarding oneself with humility. Typical of Jesus, none of it is polite cocktail conversation.

Now this particular dinner party must be taking place in some sort of open air dining room where passersby can overhear the conversation. Because as the meal wears on, various folks outside start drawing near to hear what Jesus is saying. The rabble that accrues causes the Pharisees to grouse a bit about the intrusion of uninvited lowlife, hardly an attitude in keeping with the spirit of Jesus' parables. And to their grumbling, Jesus responds with this story. Begin with Luke 15:11b.

Now this is a familiar story to many of us, usually referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But notice that this story of Jesus' is not so much about a prodigal son who has a father and a brother, as it is about a man, a father, who has two sons, one, a

thoughtless hedon, and the other, a steady shooter. At least, that's how *Jesus* introduces the tale to those who have gathered to listen to him, this disparate collection of Pharisees and tax collectors, scribes and outcasts, law-makers and law-breakers.

"There was a man," begins Jesus, "who had two sons."

Now the younger son, Jesus continues, asks for, and received, his share of the father's inheritance. According to the laws of his day, this means he probably pockets about a third of his father's estate. And with this newly acquired wealth, so Jesus tells us, the boy takes off for parts unknown and commences to live the high life - "squandering his property in dissolute living," as scripture describes it.

Unfortunately for the young man, right at the point when he's spent all his money, a devastating famine strikes the countryside in which he has been partying. And either because he has few skills, or opportunities, or a very limited imagination, the only thing he can think of to do is hire himself out to feed the pigs.

Now as you might imagine, this sort of work - feeding the very animal forbidden for his people to eat - is really scraping the bottom of the barrel. But this boy is so desperate for food, he says he's even willing to climb in the pen and join in the *pigs'* slop!

And right at this nadir of the boy's adventure gone sour, we are told that the young man "comes to himself," a phrase which meant the same thing then as it does now. A light bulb goes on and he has an epiphany when he realizes that he doesn't really have to put up with this misery; there *are* other options.

After all, he thinks to himself, Dad's a pretty reasonable guy. More than reasonable, really. Maybe if I could humble myself enough to head home and grovel a little, Dad might

take me back, at least as a hired hand. And given the way things are going, that wouldn't be so bad; at least his servants have plenty to eat!

This self-referenced insight gaining traction, the younger son washes his hands of pig slop, reigns in his pride and heads for home. Eventually drawing close to his home, he spies his father in the distance and starts rehearsing his humble apology: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy...."

But before he can even get all the words out, his Dad has already run up and thrown his arms around the boy, letting out a welcoming whoop: "Welcome home, boy!" As he witnesses his Dad fall all over himself with orders to celebrate his boy's return, the son can hardly believe his good fortune.

"Get a robe, the best one!" his father yells to the servants. "Bring a ring and some new sandals. Kill a calf, a fat one, and bring some wine! My son has come home! Let's party!"

Now I can't say I altogether share the father's unfettered enthusiasm about his son's return. We all have different ideas about parenting, I guess, and who knows what really works. But to my mind, this kid deserves some natural consequences for his behavior, which, in my view, was unconscionable. Myself, I don't think it would have been such a bad thing to maybe have *made* the boy work with the servants for a while. Have him *earn* his father's forgiveness and maybe build a little character in the process. Use a little tough love and teach him a lesson. I'm just saying, you know? I got no patience for useless.

But in Jesus' story, apparently the son's weak character doesn't concern his father; he's just tickled pink the boy's come home, and can't think fast enough how to express his

unabashed delight.

Okay. So meanwhile, the elder son, who, as you recall, has been dutifully working in the fields all this time, all these months, (all these years), wearily approaches the house at the end of a long day. Wiping the sweat off his soiled brow with a grimy hand, he imagines he hears faint but festive strains of music. Naw. Must be hearing things. He shakes his aching head to clear his ears but still the music vibrates, growing louder as he nears his father's house.

As he strides to the house he calls to a servant, "What's going on here?!" And once again he can hardly believe his ears. They're celebrating the return of his brother? His useless, no account, ne'er do well brother? The dilettante? The quitter? The wastrel? The slouch? No way!

It's bad enough the guy's come home but why would anyone want to throw him a party? Nobody'd thrown *him* a party. Hadn't he been the dutiful one, diligent in his chores, constant in his commitment, obedient to his father's wishes? Wasn't he the "good" son? But when did he ever get so much as a plump goat slaughtered in his honor? And they kill a fatted calf for his useless brother? Uh uh. The rest of the family can party all night if they want to, but, he, planting himself stubbornly by the front gate, he wants no part of it.

The father, dancing around the living room in joy, notices his older boy hasn't joined them. "Where is he?" "Oh, he's sulking out by the gate." "Oh no, let me go to him," says the father. And so the father goes to his older son to plead with him to join the celebration, listens to his son's complaints, nodding with empathy. Sure, the younger boy has been a jerk. Yes, he wasted everything that was given to him. No, the boy really doesn't deserve a

second chance. Of course, yes, he can see this celebration seems unfair.

“But, son,” the father gently reminds the disgruntled young man, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because that brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and now he’s found.”

And that, friends, is the end of the story. It’s all we get to know.

Does the older boy’s heart melt in the warmth of his father’s compassion? Do the two of them link arms and go on into the house to embrace the other son? Or does the older boy stomp off in anger at the injustice of the whole arrangement? Maybe go off to enjoy a little dissolute living himself.

Does the younger son feel so grateful for his father’s generous spirit that he mends his ways and behaves over time, ultimately becoming best buds with his big brother? Or does this just turn out to be one in a series of abuses of his father’s and brother’s trust.

We’re simply never told. But don’t you wonder?

I’ll bet the crowd gathered around Jesus that day wondered what became of the one son who had no claim to his father’s love but got it anyway. Or of the other who had every right to his father’s favor, but nursed a smoldering disdain for others less worthy.

But neither they, nor we, get to know. Jesus simply doesn’t tell us. Both sons’ stories are left unfinished. We never learn what will become of either the Prodigal, or the responsible son, as though the story is ours to finish. As perhaps it is. Though I wonder how you and I will complete the tale.

Only about the father does Jesus leaves no doubt. In Jesus’ story, only the father is a fully developed character whose generous nature remains consistent as the story

unfolds. Regardless his sons' behavior, the father loves them both. Independent of their actions, the father offers them both the same acceptance, the same mercy, and the same forgiveness, extending as much to the one who thinks he does not deserve it as to the one who clearly believes he does.

It may not seem fair to offer the same love and forgiveness to the one who strayed as to the one who stayed, but could this be what is meant by "unconditional" love? Such impartiality and abundance is difficult to understand, but clearly neither the father's nature nor his actions are remotely a function of his children's understanding. Indeed, the father's love seems entirely independent of his spawn's character or actions. Indeed, nothing the sons do, from dissolute living to filial piety, from immature tantrums to manipulative schemes, seems to influence the father whatsoever as regards his endless invitation to love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

In Jesus' story, the Father's love and forgiveness is freely offered to saint and sinner alike. Again, if there is any difference in the manner in which the two sons experience their father's love, that difference lies not with the father but within them.

In fact, one wonders if either son really knows his father all that well. If so, why would the younger son hesitate even a moment to come home? And why on earth would the older son bother hovering outside to stew? Can neither of them predict their father's Way by now?

As we learned last Wednesday night, the Greek word for repentance is "metanoia." "Metanoia" means a turning, a shifting, a changing of the mind, a realignment of the heart. Or as one commentary puts it, "metanoia" is gaining "a new concept of one's self and one's

place in the scheme of things; that is, to understand ourselves differently than before."

In Jesus' story both sons seem to have such a hard time grasping their place in their father's love. One seems stuck in self-indulgence; the other in self-righteousness. Yet the father consistently loves and forgives them both. Equally.

The sons' limited capacity for understanding their place in the heart of their father reminds me of a personal experience I've shared here before, but maybe long enough ago that you'll tolerate hearing it again.

A long time ago, I lived on a farm in the north of Scotland. One of our busiest times of year was just about now, in the early spring, during lambing season. I am handy at lambing because my hands are small and I can get places neither the farmer nor the shepherd could. Plus, I weigh about the same as an average sheep and am able to "cope a ewe," that is, to grab her neck with a shepherd's crook and flip her on her back. That's how one attends to a lamb's delivery. Though the people who are really handy at it can use one of those little bitty shepherd's crooks and flip a ewe by her leg.

Anyway, as I've also mentioned before, in part due to breeding and in part, to genetic stupidity, many first-time sheep moms, or gimmers as they're called, often don't take to their newborns. They just ignore them. Or maybe they'll have twins, and decide to feed only one of them. Or maybe they'll fancy another ewe's lamb and try to bully her for it. Well, the unavoidable result of all this faulty parental practice is many a miserable orphan lamb.

So long about a month into the lambing season, every sheep farm north of Inverness becomes so over-populated with these petite ovine rejects, euphemistically

called "pet lambs," that you can't *give* 'em away. They're no good for eating for another six months and in the busy lambing season, nobody has time to care for them, except maybe the odd errant American. Due to general neglect, pet lambs rarely thrive, and nobody much cares. Just a cost of doing business.

Well, much to the amusement of the farm staff, I personally was quite taken with my pet lambs. There were 26 of them, all of whom I tagged, named and housed in a little pen I built for them off my kitchen. I coddled them and wrote poems to them. And several times a day, I fed them formula from a big bucket with six teats around the bottom.

And every time I fed them, those increasingly hefty lambs would come barreling at me as though they hadn't eaten for days, pushing each other, and me, all over the place in a desperate attempt to get their share.

Mind you, there was always plenty of formula available, and plenty of affection. Not a single time did I ever depart until every single one of them had drunk their fill and received a thorough scratch on the brisket.

Made no difference. Every time I appeared, those lambs still fell all over each other as though it were the last time they'd ever get to eat. They never calmed down, never stopped competing with one another for every drop of sustenance and scratch of affection there was to be had, never noticed the consistent fact that the formula kept coming until everyone had had their fill, that it never ran out, that there was always plenty for everybody.

The two sons in Jesus' story were like those lambs: stubbornly oblivious to the consistent fact that their father's love has no limit. That it is offered freely, that it never runs out, that there is always plenty for everyone. But then again, unlike the lambs, the sons'

story, like ours, is not yet finished.

I wonder how it will end.

To the glory of God. Amen

