

Ephesians 1: 3-14
John 1: 10-13
January 5, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In his parable of the prodigal son Jesus portrays a young man who wastes his inheritance and finds himself barely keeping alive by doing work that violated all of the values he had been taught. No one needs to tell him what a wreck he has made of his life. He knows. No one needs to tell him he deserves the life he has. He knows. And yet somewhere even in the depths of his degradation he believes he has a home. He believes he can return to that home.

This dim yet living hope causes him to leave this abysmal and hopeless life to find out if it is really true that he has a home. He embarks on a journey of faith born of utter desperation. He has no idea if he will be received or if the door will be barred against him.

He knows he has thrown away any right to be considered family in this home. But perhaps he could be admitted as a servant. Perhaps if he can be taken back as a servant he can earn his way back into the family and the trust of his father.

What he doesn't know is this: Every day his father has taken a walk to the path that led his son away from his love and protection. Every day he has scanned the point where the path disappears into the horizon. Every day he has allowed for the possibility that he would see the stumbling figure of his son. Every day he has hoped that the very path which had led his son away would be the way that brought him back to his father's heart. The father is not armed with a lecture or threats. He brings only the emptiness that can only be filled by the return of his beloved child.

And so the day arrives when the father takes his stand on the hillock overlooking the path and to his joy he sees a small dot on the path that slowly grows into a slow moving, bent over form, filthy and in rags, trudging toward him.

For the son's part he is completely unaware that he is observed. He is too busy practicing his speech that, he hopes, will regain him admittance to home if only as a servant. He has no clue that—not only is he observed on this day—he has been looked for ever since he left.

And so it is that the son is surprised to hear a cry of joy and the sound of running feet. He is nearly bowled over by the force of his father's bear hug. He is overwhelmed by the tears pouring from his father's eyes which create streaks down his dark and dusty face. Soon the tears merge, merging into a stream of emotions which no language can adequately name.

The son tries his speech about being a servant. The father will have none of it. Get a robe for my son. Kill the fatted calf! Prepare a feast! For this my son who was lost is not found. He was dead but now he lives.

I tell this story because it is frequently misunderstood. This is no reward for a dissolute and selfish life. It is about what it means to be a child of God. In short this story is an illustration of that curious yet profound statement of John:

But to all who did receive him, (that is, who believed in his name), he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, or the will of the flesh, or the will of man, but of God.

Paul echoes this idea in his letter to the Ephesians:

(God) destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed upon us in the Beloved.

As we begin this new year together let us take a fresh look at what it means to be a child of God.

In common understanding, every human being is a child of God. We are all made in God's image—however we may interpret that phrase. In this sense there is no distinction among all humanity, so what need is there for religions? Religions in general and Christianity in particular are perceived by many to be clubs for the spiritually inclined. Worse than that, they are seen as exclusive clubs for people who believe the right things. Even worse than that is the perception that religions claim privileged status with their god and only those who are admitted to their particular club and are willing to abide by its rules and beliefs will receive the reward of paradise after this life.

Is there any wonder why vast numbers of people see no reasons for belonging to such groups which take up so much time and demand so much money? And do not we who participate in such groups have to recognize the validity of this perspective?

How do we answer this harsh but not inaccurate critique?

The hard fact is that there *is* no reasoned and logical response. We are not here to defend the church against criticisms which in the main are true. Our only power of persuasion lies in a changed life that speaks for the power of God. And it is here that we claim another meaning for the phrase "children of God."

You see the true crisis in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is not his acceptance by his father back into the home. The crisis lies in whether the son will be able to accept that he is restored to his full place in the father's heart. It will be relatively easy to return on a conditional basis and to hope that in time he will earn his father's trust and once again join the family at

the table. This is the fundamental belief of American culture. There are those who deserve what they have through diligence and hard work. And then there are the freeloaders, the “takers.” Our value derives from our utility, what we *do*. There is no such thing as a free lunch.

This attitude is so deeply ingrained in us that we do not even notice that it has shaped our understanding of our relationship with *God*. We have this idea that God is evaluating our performance as human beings. Our acceptance by God is based on our good and righteous behavior. When the time comes we hope we have led a good enough life to merit life in heaven. But many of us fear that when the time comes we will fall short. I suggest to you that to the extent that we adopt this attitude we reflect the assumptions of the prodigal son.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims something so entirely different it is revolutionary even and especially in our day. It is this: God does not want servants, slaves, employees. God wants sons and daughters who know they are loved *because they are loved just as they are. They are loved just because. They are loved **for the love of it all.***

Friends, this is not a relationship we can work our way into. We cannot *earn* it. As John writes, we must receive this love—that is, to simply accept it and say, “thank you.” Indeed John says that the path is not to accept some concept of unconditional love. The path lies through a person—Jesus Christ. We receive *him*. We come to the love of God *through receiving and following him*. As we receive him we recognize that we come to his table as sisters and brothers—as *family members who all are expected and looked for*. Indeed as Paul writes this is God’s entire destiny for us and all his children. Amen.