

Luke 15: 11-32
September 22, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

This parable is so connected to setting of the two parables that we heard last week that to skip over it would be to miss the meanings from the passage as a whole. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin have prepared the ground for this well known and controversial story.

Remember that a parable is a story that is literally “laid along side of” a real life event. A parable teaches by allowing us to make our own associations. The parables of Jesus endure because they are always capable of yielding new meanings. As we grow spiritually we make new associations and discover new insights. We are freed to allow the scripture to speak in new ways rather than to imprison them in fixed meanings.

Let's begin by recalling the real life event that sparks the parables. Tax collectors and sinners are seeking Jesus out. Instead of turning them away, Jesus not only meets with them but accepts the food and drink they bring. This disturbs the scribes and Pharisees. From their point of view Jesus is offering what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” In other words God loves you and has no desire for you to change. Cheap grace becomes what in addiction recovery is called enabling. It perpetuates the addiction or broken behavior by an acceptance which offers no way out.

But what the scribes and Pharisees miss is the possibility that the tax collectors and sinners seek out Jesus *because* they feel the pain of separation from God. They are in genuine anguish and are looking to be restored to relationship with God. This is what we call salvation. Jesus for his part isn't there to commiserate with them and make them comfortable with the very lives that are causing them pain. He believes they can be restored. That is why

he came into the world—to restore the lost. This is one implication of the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

But Jesus does not stop there. He goes on to tell a story about a father and two sons. The one son we know very well. He is not willing to wait for his father to die to receive his inheritance. He wants it *now*. By taking his inheritance he in effect has killed his father. He has fast forwarded their relationship to the point where the father is gone and all that is left is his estate.

Meanwhile the older brother stays at home. He too could make use of the estate. But he chooses to live as if his father is alive and the estate is not his to enjoy. Friends this is a laudable and inspiring decision. Years of hearing this parable titled “the Prodigal Son” has made a saint out of the one son and a villain out of the other. Imagine how the father feels: disappointment, confusion, hurt and likely anger toward the one son who has rejected his love; and warm gratitude for the other son who chooses to honor his father and remains obedient to him. Yet as much as he loves and appreciates the faithfulness of the older brother he cannot reject the son who has rejected him. The family is incomplete. Whereas the prodigal son chose the worldly inheritance of his father over the person of his father; the father cares nothing for the wasting of his estate. *He wants his son back!* Every day he walks to a hill from which he can see the road that will bring his son back. Then one day it happens.

I am not going to rehearse the rest of the story. We are used to lining up on either the side of the brother who is received home or the older brother who feels like chopped liver. We are led to believe that Jesus is advocating a world where the bad people are really spiritually better than the good ones who play by the rules. It is the dramatic sinners who get the party.

However, let's look at the parable from a different angle. What if the issue of repentance and forgiveness is not the only one? What if Jesus is hoping we might hear an even deeper message?

With the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees in the background, let us recall the opening of the parable: "A father had two sons." What is the implied relationship here? Whatever the relationship we have had with our earthly parents, for Jesus, the assumed relationship is that of unconditional love. To borrow from the song that was a hit for Randy Travis back in the 90's, "Daddies don't just love their children every now and then. It's a love without end, amen." Jesus models this relationship when he calls his heavenly father, "Abba" which roughly translated means "Dad." Implied in this word is intimacy, and the freedom that comes that no matter we go, whatever we do, we are loved. This is not cheap grace. It is the essential quality of mental, emotional and spiritual health. At the depth of his despair, the prodigal "comes to his senses." He awakens to the fact that he has a father who loves him and who has always loved him. It is this awakening which opens the possibility of going home.

To be sure he believes that his behavior has so damaged his relationship with his father that he cannot go back as a son. He must live in his father's house as a slave. In today's language he can only imagine returning as an employee whose continuing presence is conditional on his satisfactory work. He will need to earn his keep. He has forfeited the freedom of a son. This made sense to the people of the time. It certainly would have made sense to the scribes and Pharisees. And so it is a great surprise the father will have none of the son's proposal. Remember the father has been looking for the son to return home. He wants him

back *as a son!* And so the son does not get what he thinks he deserves. He does not get to set the conditions of his return. He is received completely.

Now let's look at the older brother. What does he say when he hears that the prodigal has come home? "I have been working as a slave..." Think about this. What does this suggest about the older son's relationship to his father? All these years he has lived with in his father's house. His father loves and appreciates him more than words can say. But has the older son received this love? Has he rejoiced in the intimacy and joy of uncomplicated love? No! He has all this time lived in his father's house as an employee, faithfully doing the tasks and waiting for an appreciation *he already has!*

Friends I invite you this morning to see the parable not just about repentance and forgiveness. I invite you to see this parable as about what the apostle Paul proclaims as the "glorious freedom of the children of God." (Rom.8: 21) Whether we have been dramatically redeemed from a life of sin; or if we have never been lost spiritually God's desire for us is that we experience *freedom*. God is pleased with those of us who are *not lost*. But he wants more for us than this. God does not want his children to behave like employees who have to earn his love. God wants us to feel the lifting of the one ton weight that belabors our days. God wants every day to be a "get to" live day not a "have to" live day.

That is why whether we are once born or twice, birthing day is every day. And the response which pleases God most is unfettered joy for this amazing gift. Amen.