

The Waiting – and Seeking – Father  
A Sermon by Dr. William D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
Lent 4  
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**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

(NRSV)

**15** Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable:

<sup>11</sup>“There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup> When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup> So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe -- the best one -- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate,’ <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup> He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father. ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

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A colleague shared a story regarding some friends of his, whose own son had been on a journey that clearly did not have their blessing.

The parents and their son had experienced somewhat of a falling out about the readiness of the son to take such a trip, but that wasn't enough to stop the son from striking out on his own, only telling them that he was headed overseas.

Once he was gone, the animosity they had felt about his leaving evaporated. Their primary emotions about their son were a sense of missing him deeply, and worrying about him constantly.

Their daily trips to the mailbox also took on new meaning. Instead of just expecting a smattering of some impersonal first class and junk mail, they began to look for postcards from their son.

Once in a while they would get one - one postmarked England, another from France, yet another from Germany, one from Israel.

On one he had written that he had been robbed, but not to worry that he was okay. As though parents know how *not* to worry about news like that.

Then, a number of weeks passed by with no communication from their son, and they felt heart-sick. Many of you know that feeling well.

But this story ends well, because one day they went out to the mailbox and there was that long-awaited postcard, postmarked Cairo, Egypt. On the back – written in the familiar scrawl of their son – was this simple message:

**"Tired of Traveling. Homesick. Left Egypt. Be Home Soon."**

A few days later a taxi pulled up at the curb and they were thrilled to see their son emerge. They embraced there, by the mailbox that had been such a significant part of their connection to each other. And that night they had a celebration.

God, like a loving parent, longs to receive that postcard from each of us, "***Tired of traveling. Homesick. Leaving Egypt. Be home soon.***"

Today's a good day to write it and to start toward home.

**Or, just maybe, today is the day to recognize that you are a lot like the older brother, rather than the roving prodigal. Maybe your issue with God is not an attempt to escape his clutches, but rather a resentment over God's seeming willingness to forgive folks that you certainly aren't ready to forgive, and to accept folks into his fellowship that you don't feel deserve to be there.**

Or possibly you're more like a neighbor, observing this dysfunctional family with its missing son, moping and resentful older brother, and dotty old father who seems to be able to forgive about anything, no matter how shameful.

But I'm getting ahead of the biblical story itself.

Let's look at its context.

We find some of the context in chapter 14, where Jesus is criticized because he eats with the wrong sort of people. Apparently Jesus' contemporaries had just as hard a time recognizing that Jesus – on behalf of his Heavenly Father – had a "big tent" perspective on God's love; meaning *the more the merrier of whatever stripe or description*.

Instead, they wanted a prophet such as Jesus to be a bit – or probably a lot! – more

discriminating -- you know -- like they were.

And Jesus, through his parables, is saying, “**Nope. I’m going to celebrate and fellowship with those who are so shocked to be invited to the party that they show up without having to be begged to come, and who are sufficiently hungry for food and fellowship that they don’t have time to look around and judge who should or shouldn’t be at the table with them.**”

Further, Jesus implies (through Luke’s arrangement of Jesus’ stories) the following:

*Just in case you miss the fact that I’m fed up with your snootiness and judgmental attitude, let me tell you a story about a shepherd who loses a sheep, finds that lost sheep, and invites all his neighbors to party with him (Luke 15:1-7).*

And, Jesus says further:

*Just in case the story of a lost sheep hasn’t made my point, here’s another one about a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10).*

In essence, Jesus is saying to his critics:

***Can’t you see that when something that’s been lost is found, it’s a heck of a lot more exciting than hanging around with folks too blind to recognize that they might be lost and in need of salvation!?***

Still don’t get it? (Jesus might be thinking), let me nail the point. I’ve told you a story of a **lost sheep** and the shepherd’s joy at finding it; I’ve told you a story of a **lost coin** and the woman’s joy at finding it; now I’ll tell you a story of a lost boy – but it will be a story with a twist. And the twist is in the behavior of the **loser**, not the **lost animal, the lost coin, or the lost person**.

- When the sheep gets lost, the shepherd knows that sheep don’t find their own way home, so he searches until he finds that poor helpless animal.
- When the coin gets lost, the homeowner knows that coins don’t just roll back into your life, so she turns the place upside down, until she finds that missing item of value.
- **However, when a *human being* intentionally wanders off and becomes lost, tracking the missing one down and hauling her or him back home may not bring rejoicing, it may just bring more rebellion and heartache.**

But you can pray, and you can hope, and you can look for postcards or phone calls indicating they are, at least, still alive.

And, in the case of the father in the story – ***who is clearly meant to be a representative of God’s behavior*** – you can keep an eye out *just in case* a familiar figure comes walking into view.

The story of the father/son reunion is heartwarming, isn’t it?

But to the crowd to whom – and in the culture in which -- Jesus told the story, what we find

heartwarming would have been not only shocking, but even repulsive.

Why? Let's listen to an explanation from a Middle Eastern scholar, who writes about the beginning of Jesus' parable:

> It is a surprise in a Middle Eastern story that the younger son speaks first. He is out of his place already! What he speaks is even more astonishing. He is basically telling his father to "drop dead." All Eastern commentators on this story acknowledge that the son's request is totally illegitimate. It is an unthinkable request. A father only gives the inheritance in death.

The father should explode with anger at such an inappropriate request. [However] he does not explode. He grants a request that was completely unimaginable in his time. Such is the nature of the father in the story. This is a very unusual father!

Luke tells us, *literally*, that the father "divided between them his life (in the Greek *bios*) in v. 12. Later, v. 30, the older brother will accuse the younger of "devouring [the father's] life (*bios*) with prostitutes."

But think of this story, symbolic of God's self-giving, in light of Jesus' self-giving.

The Father gives his life to his sons -- it would seem that the older son also received his share -- a double share -- of his father's life/property.

To gain a further sense of the power of this story in the context of Jesus' times, listen to this explanation:

> The son goes out and squanders his property in dissolute living. Eastern commentators do not take this to mean a necessarily immoral lifestyle on the part of the son. He is a spend-thrift to be sure. He spends money like it is going out of style. We often talk about the Prodigal as being engaged in all kinds of immoral activities. Eastern commentators do not read it that way. It is the Elder Brother who suggests that the Prodigal has spent his money on prostitutes (v. 30). The Elder Brother is not a very reliable source of information on the matter!

The Greek words describing the younger son's behavior do not imply immoral behaviors, but thoughtless actions. "Scattering" the money without any thought of future consequences. He is living just for the moment. This may have worked out all right, except for the natural disaster of famine which he hadn't counted on. The younger son's dire straits were not completely his own fault. The famine, of which he had no part in causing, also played some part in it.

> In verse 16 the Prodigal reaches the low point. He wishes he were a pig! At least the pigs had something to eat. And then the young

man "came to himself." We usually think of this as his moment of repentance. But that is not the meaning of repentance that these stories of the lost in Luke 15 convey. Repentance in these stories occurs when the lost is found.

Arabic translations of these words read that the Prodigal "got smart." He got smart in the sense that he now was ready to look out for himself. He had a plan. He knew that his father had many hired hands who had bread enough and to spare. He'll go back home. He knows he can't go back as a son. He won't go back as a slave. So he will go back as a hired hand. "He will not live at home, and not join the family. He will pay is own way. First he must convince his father to support the plan" (Bailey, p. 133). The Prodigal's plan, that is, is to \*earn his restored status\*. "Give me a second chance. I'll earn it back and repay you. I am not now worthy to be called your son, but I will be if you give me a chance"

This son not only got a chance, he got a father who set aside all thoughts of protecting his own dignity to portray his joy at the son's return.

> In ancient Palestine it was regarded as unbecoming -- a loss of dignity -- for a grown man to run. Yet the father set aside all concern for propriety and ran. [p. 302]

> [the Middle Eastern scholar, Joseph Bailey] notes that Arabic translations of this story refuse to translate this running! They avoid this because it is clear that the father here is acting as God acts towards prodigals. Running in public is too humiliating to attribute to a person who symbolizes God. [p. 174]

> [The father's] response is described in a rush of verbs that move rapidly from seeing, to running, embracing, and kissing. By these actions the father gives an emotional welcome before the son speaks a word. The father does not wait for explanations, confessions, or promises. NOR IS HE CONCERNED WITH THE RESTORATION OF HIS OWN DAMAGED HONOR. It has been suggested that running to meet the son while he is still at a distance also has the purpose of protecting the son from the scorn of the rest of the village, who would remember the way that he had treated his father and make their feelings known (Bailey, 181-82).

And thus we are left to ponder the meaning of a story in which a representative figure for God the Father behaves in a very undignified manner.

Might this give us hope that God could care sufficiently for us that He would reserve the

judgment that might be due us, because He is so intent on welcoming us?

But we are also left with the haunting image of the older brother. We aren't told whether he ever got out of his funk and joined in the celebration.

But then, we are also never told in Jesus' first two parables whether the villagers ever joined the shepherd in his celebration over finding his lost sheep, or the woman in her joy over finding her lost coin.

So, who (or what) is Jesus saying the "problem" is here?

He is saying that the problem – or the key question – is not whether "sinners" will come to repentance – they do all the time. The problem or question is whether or not the "righteous" will join in the celebration thrown for the return of the prodigal one.

Stated another way, the question is whether we – as people of faith – behave as God behaves and ***base our relationships upon mercy***, or behave as the "uppity righteous" do in so many biblical stories, and ***base our relationship upon merit***.

Fred Danker, the author of the book: Jesus and the New Age writes some challenging things to our congregations about this passage:

> Against so much that is drab in religion, Jesus depicts the happy laughter of a Father who invites the angels to the home-coming festival. Somber, morbid religiosity has no place in the Kingdom. Dancing, the blowing of trumpets, beating of drums is a legitimate part of the church's worship (cf. 2 Samuel 6:5). The cult of respectability must give way to the cultivation of the art of joy over God's delight in reclaiming the refuse of humanity. In worship the Shepherd is congratulated, not the sheep. God does not commend the righteous for remaining righteous (vs. 7), and Jesus has not come to compliment them for what they ought to be in the first place. Nor has he criticized their standards. Their position is not made less secure by Jesus' outreach to publicans and sinners. All he expects of them is that they share his joy over the return of the lost. [p. 169]

In closing, I will read an autobiography in five short chapters that I came across some years ago. It speaks to us, who have a tendency to not simply be "Prodigal" once, but again and again.

### An Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Author Unknown

#### Chapter 1

I walk down the street  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk  
I fall in  
I am lost  
I am helpless  
I have no idea where I am

It isn't my fault  
It takes forever to find a way out.

## Chapter 2

I walk down the street  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk  
I fall in  
I can't believe I'm in the same place  
But it isn't my fault  
I still don't know where I am  
And it still takes a long time to get out

## Chapter 3

I walk down the street  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk  
I fall in  
It's become a habit  
I know exactly where I am  
It is my fault  
I get out immediately

## Chapter 4

I walk down the street  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk  
I walk around it

## Chapter 5

I walk down a different street