

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3; 11-32

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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Deeply Loved & Deeply Lost

It's such a good story. It's such a frustrating story. It's a story many of us have heard multiple times in our lives if we grew up in the church and it's a story that I have preached the most over the course of 14 years of ordained ministry. I have gained a lot of insight into this scripture that we usually title "The Prodigal Son" and yet every time I sit with this story, I am amazed. I am amazed in both good and bad ways. I am amazed at the audacity of the younger brother to insult his father and his family in such a blatant way. I am amazed that the older brother remains faithful to his family and at the same time amazed that he does not get it at the end. I am amazed by the father who loves the children in ways that they don't deserve. I am amazed by the fact that we can be deeply loved and deeply lost at the same time. It's such a good story. It's such a frustrating story.

I think part of the real frustration for me is that even though I move from judging one son and the other and ways they don't "get it," if I am honest with myself, I am also in a regular state of "not getting it" with it comes to the radical and amazing grace of our incredible God. I still buy into the idea that grace comes with a price that I'm supposed to somehow pay back, because truly, who can be that generous? That over the top? That good to me in spite of me?

Today, I wanted to offer a different way to ponder this story and reflect on the ways on which we are deeply loved and deeply lost. And so, inspired by a concept from a favorite theologian of mine, I decided to write letters to each of these two sons as a way to share the message this morning. Stephanie Easton has agreed to read one of the letters so you can hear a different voice, so we'll begin with my letter to the child who ran away with Stephanie reading it to you all.

***To the one who ran away:** I'm starting with you because I cannot really relate to you. At least I don't think I can. The first thing I want to do is judge you and stand in my own self-righteousness. I would never do what you did. How can you be so selfish? How do you have the audacity to ask for your inheritance before your parent has died? Why do you think you deserve it? Surely, you know that culturally what you were asking was basically telling them that you wished that they were already dead. And then you leave, break your father's heart, embarrass your family, and squander it all in "dissolute living." I am mad thinking about it all.*

We don't have much in common, you and I. I've never run away from home, I was not a partier or rebellious outside of the normal teenager thresholds. I would never do what you did to your parent. But I've also never had a time in my life when I hit rock bottom in the way that you did...and then experience a welcome home like the one you got. I've never had a parent run full speed to meet me, clearly waiting for me to come home, and wrap their arms around me with such a ferocity that made me speechless. My own father has never actually kissed me, even as I know he loves me. So is part of my problem the fact that you got to experience a tangible physical welcome and love unlike I've ever experienced? Am I envious because God's love is that generous? Absolutely. Yes. It does not feel fair.

So what happened afterward? Did you really mean it when you came back repentant? Did you change your ways and live your remaining days in gratitude for all that had been given back to you? Did you actually feel bad or did you just feel bad that it didn't work out the way you wanted it to? Did you get up the next day after the party and start helping out in the fields? Did you take care of your parent as they continued to age?

I know I'm still being cynical. Even as I write this to you, I am recognizing that there is something happening within me too. I can see God's amazing love for you in this story and yet, I find myself withholding it. Everything in me wants to accuse YOU of having no empathy, of not caring about how many people you hurt to do whatever you wanted carelessly, but even as I know I should, I am struggling to empathize with you. So I'm trying to figure out how to relate to you. What is it that we might have in common, if anything? Who are you beneath the labels of "the prodigal son, selfish, or sinner?"

"Dying of hunger" is how the story describes you when you hit rock bottom. It took you craving what the pigs were eating for you to come to your senses and realize that this was not how life needed to be. When your careless party days were over, when all of those people who said they were your friends abandoned you when they realized you were broke, it took "dying of hunger" for you to have clarity. And so, maybe a new label for you could be "the hungry one."

Something within you hungered for something more-not only when you hit rock bottom, but even when you dared to insult your family and leave the way you did. It wasn't a healthy hunger then, but something in you craved more.

I'm a parent myself, and although my children are still small, I know them. I can anticipate their needs and I can see what it is they need before they even ask. Your father, in their wisdom and natural parenting instinct, knew that's what you needed

too. They didn't hold you back. This parent loved you so much they let you go, even as you broke them. They knew you.

This parent knew that you had to leave in order to really come home. That you needed to be lost in order to be found. That you could not taste resurrection without dying.

And so maybe where I can try and relate to you is to understand that we all hunger for something-and even though I do not want to discover it the way you did at the beginning or the end of your story, dare I say I almost respect that you attended to your hunger? I usually ignore mine. I would never do what you did, but I know what it's like to hunger for something more-more joy, more love, more to this life. I also know what it's like to feel shame-shame that I'm disappointing people, shame that I'm not good enough, shame that I am undeserving of good things. Maybe if I paid more attention to my hunger and stopped minimizing it, it would bring me closer to a tangible love of God beyond my understanding.

Your story ends in an embrace and a celebration. The truth is, even if you were not truly grateful, even if you were lying or manipulating the situation, or even if you spent the rest of your life making it up to your Parent, they didn't care one way or another. They just ran toward you, fed and clothed you, and celebrated you. To hear we are loved is one thing. To feel ourselves embraced like that is another. I hope you know how lucky you are that you got to experience that. Yes, I'm still a bit envious of how God's love is this generous, but maybe I get you a little bit more now.

To the one who stayed: So clearly, my sympathies are with you. I'm an oldest child too. I fit the stereotypes of an oldest child-rule follower, responsible, staying home and getting things done, trying to set a good example, always dutiful. You did everything right. In this story, I imagine you coming home after a long day of working on the family property, ready to relax and get a shower, and then stopped in your tracks by the clear sound of a celebration from the house. A party that you did not know about and did not get an advance invitation to attend... at your own home! Unlike your brother in this story, I ache for *you*. It was so unfair.

When preachers and theologians tell this story, they tell me that I'm supposed to see you as self-righteous and unforgiving, but I look at you and see pain. Pain that I understand too well. You see, even if I want something, even if I "hunger" for something, I tend to push it aside to make others happy. I grew up in a home where the cultural norms told me that being dutiful was more important than being honest about my needs or feelings. And so, probably like you, I swallowed a lot and at some point, started forgetting what it is that I even wanted or needed. I understand in theory what people mean when they say you should take care of yourself first so you can be better for others, but it's so hard to put that into actual practice.

Is that what happened to you too? You saw how your father's heart broke when your brother left, right? You did not ever want to be the cause of that kind of pain, and so, maybe to your own detriment, you stopped speaking up for your own desires and needs, more worried about how it would affect others than thinking about what it was doing to you. Somewhere along the way, you got lost too, just in a different way.

Here's the thing. You were *right* to respond the way you did. You were *right* to be angry. You were *right* to find your Parent's love over the top, too much, too generous, too forgiving without any kind of justice. You knew right away that the real prodigal in this story was your father. Prodigal when defined as excessive, over the top, spending recklessly and freely, wastefully extravagant ... everyone uses this word for your brother, but you knew in this moment it was actually your father. Their prodigal love was shocking.

I know this doesn't change anything, but I am sorry that you never got a party of your own prior to all of this. I'm sorry your parent didn't do this for you, you who seemed so deserving. But your father did tell you that everything that was theirs was yours. And so I wonder, could you have had a celebration like this if you had just asked? I'm thinking yes, but I'm guessing along with a lot of other things you had to swallow, you forgot how to ask. Maybe you didn't even know it was what you needed until you saw it for someone else. And so maybe there's something to be learned from you here in that it's essential to ask for what it is you need and desire. Maybe if we (and I'm saying we because I need to learn it too) took the actual time to figure out what it is we need and ask, then we would also experience a tangible love and celebration of who we are that we didn't even know we needed.

At the end of this story, your Parent says that "we HAVE to celebrate and rejoice" and they are pleading with you to come on home, to walk in the doors. This is the last thing they say to you as you stand outside, feeling all of your feelings. "We have to celebrate and rejoice..." and suddenly I notice that joy is the deep desire and dare I even say, necessity of God's house. God wants all of us to party. The parent insists on this, pleads for it because being found in any way is deserving of a celebration. So what did you end up deciding?

What will it take for you to walk in through those doors and try? Because not all lessons are learned through facts and study-some are learned simply as you laugh and dance. Some hearts are only healed at the feast.

A favorite theologian of mine shared that the vindication for you in this story, older child, probably for both you and for me, is that the *power* in this story is *yours*. It's

ours. Your sibling has gone inside. They came home. Even though we don't know what they'll do tomorrow, they're not breaking your father's heart today. Your parent is rejoicing. "But they are also waiting for you at the doorway. Waiting for you to stop being lost. Waiting for you to come home. Waiting for you to take hold at last the inheritance that has always been yours. Did you know that your choices are so powerful? You get to write this ending. *You get to write this ending.*" (Debie Thomas)

As the sun sets, the party continues. What will you end up deciding? What will we choose, you and I?

Amen.