

Luke 15:11-32
The Parable of the Waiting Father
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Once again, good morning, friends. It is good to be with you in worship. This morning, I'm going to tell you a story. Then for the next six weeks or so, each time we meet we are going to spend time together listening to some very important and truly beautiful stories from God's Word together. That sounds easy enough, right? You might even be thinking to yourself, I hear stories all the time: I read them to my children, I see them on the news, I hear them from my co-workers ad nauseam. But I want to suggest that these stories we hear from Scripture have the ability to change your life, if you allow yourself to be drawn into the story.

There's an author by the name of James Bryan Smith, who has a book called *The Good and Beautiful God*. In it, he suggests that we as humans construct meaning in our lives through a series of narratives. In other words, we allow certain stories about ourselves, about the world around us, about God, to shape our understanding of life. Each of these stories paints a picture of the world that we see in our mind's eye.

With these paintings, our lives exhibit either a truthful and life-giving vision of what life is like...OR like some paintings, they depict life as hopeless and without form, shape, or meaning. Tragically, Smith says, there are many who believe that the true story of God is that God is angry with them, that he's vengeful, he's disappointed in us because of the sin in our lives, and that God is out to get us for all the times we've let God down. They believe in a god who says *get yourself together and only then come to me*; who says *unless you figure out all your issues, you can't be in my presence, because I can't be around your dirt*.

Whether this is reflective of you or not, I think you will agree that in our world, this is the narrative that some people have about who God is and what God thinks of them. Yes? It's true; you know it is.

For the next six weeks, we are going to look at the stories Jesus told that paint a picture of a very different God than the angry, vengeful God we hear about from those false narratives. Very simply, what we are going to do is look to the Bible, specifically the stories that Jesus told those around him—we call them parables. These parables paint a picture for us of who God is, and what God thinks about you and about me.

There are two very simple reasons why Jesus tells these parables: 1. So that people's minds would think differently; 2. So that with their actions, people would behave differently. Thinking differently and behaving differently. These are the same goals I have for us in these six weeks. Because the truth of the matter is that though we may or may not have these faulty images in our minds about who God is, many of us are content to live low adventure, low impact lives, and that, I believe, is not what these pictures paint of God's extravagant, lavish, incomparable love. Imagine getting the greatest news in the world, like having a new grandchild, or winning the lottery, or having a donut at Wabash Donut named after you, and your response was (huh.)

One might think that you were either asleep or completely numb to the excitement that surrounds you. The truth of these passages is that great news leads to changed, different lives...and in the cases where it does not lead to change, the Scriptures say that this is a tragedy to be mourned with weeping and gnashing of teeth. Does anyone here want to weep and gnash their teeth through life? Of course not...unless, of course, you could never again have a delicious Wabash Donut (that would be something to gnash about!)

This morning, we're going to begin with the most famous and beloved parable of Jesus' ministry. It's the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But before we begin, we need to set the scene just a bit. Even before Jesus tells this parable, which is part of a 3 parable set, Luke tells us where Jesus was and who he was with, which gives us a clear hint about the faulty image he is going to address. Jesus was gathered in a home around a great banquet table and with him, verse 1 says, were a group of tax collectors and sinners. Then it goes on to say that the Pharisees and scribes (the religious leaders and teachers) grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." This line in verse 2 shines a light on the faulty image of God that they have in their minds. Every religious man would have known that the act of sitting down with another person at a meal was the equivalent of saying "I accept you." For Jesus to sit with people who are dirty, who are openly sinful, who are the scourge of society, and share a meal flies in the face of what their image of God would allow.

Now we come to how Jesus repaints the picture for us. Listen to Luke 15 starting at verse 11

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him...

I want to stop there for a moment and comment about this first section. Who was it that the father saw in this moment? Because the actions of this younger son were so scandalous. This father of two sons has his younger say to him, "Dad, I know you're not dead yet, but I'd like to cash in my inheritance." This would have been the ultimate slap in the face to his father, and because word got around so quickly, this father would have become the laughing stock of the village. Older men were meant to receive deference and honor from their families, they were a symbol of tradition and reverence within their family, and here comes one of his children who is basically saying, "Dad, you are better dead to me than alive, because what is truly important to me about you is the inheritance I get when you leave. And if you would give it to me now, I would appreciate it."

People around him would have seen this and the father would have become nothing but a joke to his neighbors. But what does the father do? He divides the property and gives the son's share to him. The younger son then goes and liquidates his assets and goes off to a foreign country for dissolute living, leaving his father and older brother to continue in the family business with half as much to work with, and twice as much scorn and ridicule from their neighbors. Not a very considerate thing, right?

There in the far off country, a famine hits and the young man is left without any more money, and is forced to go work in the pig pens feeding pods to the pigs. This would have been doubly insulting to a Jew – not only is he reduced to working in the animal pens, but pigs were unclean to Jews, and so it was a double whammy. Author Fred Craddock says, "There is a condition worse than death, and that is to be lost..."

While he is in deep with the pigs, the young man begins to lament, "These pigs...these pigs have pods to eat, and what do I have? Nothing. Oh how I long for some pods to fill my belly." He doesn't dare dream of going home and being received, who would dare to dream such a thing? Instead he began to think of the slaves in his father's home. "Perhaps I could offer myself as a slave in my father's house." So he gathers himself and heads for home.

And while he is still a long way off, his father, who is working in the fields, slaving away half-staffed because his one son not only left but took half of his resources with him, leaving the father to be the laughing stock of the town, leaving him to be looked upon with shame—"why didn't he parent his son better?" This father sees his son coming over the hill, and he begins to run, not walk, but thunderously run towards his wayward son. He's coming toward him and the son is realizing all of the heartache and shame and difficulty he put his father through, and all he sees is this man charging forward towards him at a thunderous pace, and what do you think he is thinking to himself in this moment?

A friend of mine tells the story of how he told this story to a group of 100 inner city high school kids, nearly all of them who had never heard this story. And when he got to the point where the dad is charging toward the son, there was a young man who was sitting in the front row, on the edge of his seat. And when the father approached the son, my friend asked the students the rhetorical question, "And what do you think he did?" This young man shouts out: "HE KILLS HIM!"

In that moment, he is reflecting the picture of God he had in his own mind, the God who is angry at him, who is looking to squash him when he screws up, whose love is dependent upon what he does to earn or deserve it. Instead of being filled with rage, which he had every right to, the father was filled with compassion for the return of this lost son. The second half of that Fred Craddock quote I mentioned earlier goes like this: "...there is a condition better than life, and that is to be found."

This father runs to his son and embraces him, and kisses him. He doesn't say, "Wash all that pig smell off you first." But he hugs him and kisses him and it's messy and it's embarrassing for this father. He's so filled with love that he says bring out a robe and put it on him, put sandals on his

feet, for the one who was lost and now was found, this son who is dead is now alive. But he doesn't stop there, what else does he do? He kills the fatted calf, and what does this mean? Get ready for a banquet. And guess who has a seat at the head table?

There is a challenge in here for the religious, for the Pharisees who see themselves as the rightful recipients, and not those other people who live dissolutely. The image of God that says, there's no way that God would allow old so-and-so to be a part of the community, and have a seat at the table. Jesus paints a different picture.

I want to say in this moment in this place here today that if you are in a place in your life where you are wallowing in pig pods, get up and come back to the Father. If you are here today and you are thinking to yourself, *Yes, but you don't know what I've done. You don't know the wickedness in my heart*, if you are here and you're just lusting after pig pods, I want to say get up and come back to the Father!

But maybe you're not like this, maybe you're someone who is here every weekend and you think, *Yeah, but I'm ok, I tithe, I show up*. But maybe there is one little corner of your heart that you're protecting from God, one area where you think *I could never come to the Father with this thing, it's too shameful*. I want to say to you, get up, come back to the Father.

I hope every one of us in this room will, if we haven't already, get up and run to Jesus. I hope you will see that your image of who God is in your life will change and you will no longer see God with a negative narrative and you will see him as the waiting patient father who longs to celebrate upon the return of every one of his wandering sons and daughters. It's all of us, we've all wandered, we've all been lost. If you are still lost and you would like an invitation to come back into the Father's loving embrace, I want to give you that opportunity. In just a moment, I'm going to pray, and if you are ready, if you are saying to yourself "enough is enough, no more pig pods," I want you to quietly raise your hand as everyone has their eyes closed for prayer.

The image of God I want every one of you to have when you leave today is one of a lavishly loving, extravagantly giving Father, who is ready to prepare a great feast for you—everyone who is willing to simply come home.

Come home from your wandering...

Come home from your striving for empty things...

Come home from your apathy toward God's amazing grace...

Come home from your feelings of unworthiness...

Come home from you feeling that you can't be free from your past...

Come home because Jesus is preparing a lavish feast and you are the honored guest, you are the one he thought of as he offered his very life on the cross, you are the one God loves and is inviting to simply come home.