

THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

A sermon preached by Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.

Central United Methodist Church

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(Luke 15:1-3) Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. {2} And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." {3} So he told them this parable:

(Luke 15:11-32) Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. {12} 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. {13} 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. {14} When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. {15} 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. {16} He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. {17} 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! {18} I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; {19} I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" {20} 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. {21} 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.' {22} 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. {23} And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; {24} for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. {25} "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. {26} He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. {27} He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' {28} Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. {29} 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. {30} But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' {31} Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. {32} 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.'"

FORGIVEN

In a certain town, there was a sinner with a bad reputation. Everybody knew him—the police officers, county officials, lawyers, business

owners and everybody else in town that had been around long enough to know things. All the clergy in town knew him too. He had a laundry list of bad habits: Drinking, smoking, fighting, running around, and petty thievery. If anything crooked or dirty happened in town, Joe was usually involved. He had spent many nights in the county jail and the local judges expected to see him several times a year.

One Saturday morning after a three-day binge, he woke up with a killer headache. When he looked around, he realized he was in jail again. He looked into the stainless steel mirror, and saw a black eye. He had no idea it had happened. He looked at his prison jump suit and struggle to remember when he changed clothes. There were cuts and scrapes on his hands but he couldn't remember how they got there. That's when he said to himself, ***"I've got to change."***

After several weeks in jail, Joe was released. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind he remembered that he had been baptized as an infant in the Catholic Church so he immediately went there. The confessional was open so he walked in and sat down.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned," he said. ***It's been twenty years since my last confession.*** The priest immediately recognized the voice and said, ***"Joe, is that you?"***

"Yes, Father, it's me. I hope you have some time on your hands. I've got a lot to confess."

"Go ahead," said the priest, who thought to himself, ***"I've finally got him! I'm going to give Joe a heavy penance. He's got it coming. The other priests back at the rectory are going to wish they had taken this shift."***

Twenty minutes later Joe was still reciting all of his sins. Drinking, smoking, fighting, running around, robbery, and a few other things that

best not be mentioned. He confessed all of his sins in lurid detail. ***“Wow!”*** thinks the priest. ***“I haven’t heard a confession like this in all my years as a priest. I’m going to set a record for penance on this guy. Maybe I’ll give him a hundred ‘hail Marys’ and a thousand ‘Our Fathers.’”***

Fifteen minutes later, Joe is winding up his list. The priest is shaking his head. Joe pauses; the priest says, ***“Are you done?”***

Joe answers, ***“Well, I’ve told you all I can remember.***

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard such a confession,” said the priest.

“I probably deserve a lot of punishment,” said Joe.

The priest admitted he had never heard such a long and detailed confession.

“In that case,” said Joe, ***“I have only one other thing I want to say before you pronounce your judgment.”***

“What’s that?” said the priest.

“Remember the Prodigal Son!”

There was a long silence. Then the priest sighed and said, ***“Very well, my child. You are forgiven. Go in Peace.”*** With that, Joe walked out the door.¹

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

¹Adapted from William Kincaid, “Remember the Prodigal Son” (Lectionary Homiletics, March 25, 2001), 29.

From age to age the question has always been, ***“What is God like.”*** People in Jesus’ day were asking the same question and so Jesus gave them the greatest story ever told. We call it the parable of the prodigal son. It, along with the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin are the centerpiece of the Gospel story. I think if you want to know what God is like, read these three parables. The Bible doesn’t get much better than Luke 15. When I wonder about the nature or personality of God, this is where I turn.²

Brennan Manning Calls the 15th chapter of Luke, ***“The Gospel within the Gospel.”*** I love what he says, ***“The dramatic surprise that comes in the stories of the searching shepherd, the searching woman, and the searching father is that being found by a searching God is more important than anything we do.”*** Biblical Scholar William Shannon argues that this portion of the Bible is crucial to understanding everything else in Scripture. Put quite simply God is like the searching shepherd, the searching woman and the searching father. God is a God of love. God is a God who never stops loving us.³

I often tell people that God is like the perfect parent—mother and father. As much as a good parent loves their children, God loves us with a fierce love that is beyond anything we can comprehend. God has the attributes of a good parent.

GOD IS LIKE A PARENT WHO IS WILLING TO LET GO

God, like a good parent, is willing to let go. Henry Nouwen writes:

The father, who represents God in this story, never pulls back his hands, never withholds his blessing, never stops considering this son the beloved one. But the father cannot compel his son to stay home. He cannot force his love on his beloved. He has to let him

²J. Harold Olds, *“The Greatest Story Every Told”* (Brentwood United Methodist Church, February 8, 2004), 1.

³Brennan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness* (HarperCollins: San Francisco, CA, 2002), 135-138.

*go into freedom even though he knows the pain it will cause them both. It is love, itself, that keeps him from keeping his son at home at all cost. It is love, itself, that allows him to let his son find his own life, even with the risk of losing it.*⁴

God has endowed me with this wonderful thing called “free will.” That means I have the potential for great good but, also, the possibility for incredible harm. I am God’s child, not a robot. I am free to do as we please, even if God is not pleased. While I can never drift beyond God’s love and care, neither am I forced to live under God’s strict control.

While people want to talk about heaven and hell, I would suggest that this insipid twenty year old that we read about in Jesus’ parable created his own hell on earth. I know this story speaks to my life, maybe your also or someone you know. I know that if I reject God in my freedom that I have estranged myself from him. I also know that to separate myself from God is like being in hell. I don’t want to live in that kind of tragic alienation.

GOD IS LIKE A PARENT WHO WELCOMES US HOME

God is like any good parent who always loves their children and who would welcome them home from their worldly wondering. So what does this say about heaven and hell and judgment? Someone once asked me if I thought there was a bubble gum line in heaven. In other words was there a line reserved for those who only stole a piece of bubble gum and another line for the murderer. The implication is that God has a pineal system that punishes according to the sin or crime. I don’t believe God operates under the world’s rules and laws. God has one rule—one law—the law of love.

The great Theologian Karl Barth used to argue for something like the eventual, universal salvation of all on the basis of a passage from II Corinthians that says, “*Christ God was reconciling the world to*

⁴Source Unknown.

himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (II Cor. 5:19). Jesus didn’t say he was reconciling the Western World or the Christian World to himself. He said he was reconciling THE WORLD! If I believe Jesus died on the cross to save sinners then I also must believe that Christ died for the world.

This is hard for me to accept at times because I want a God who saves and punishes. What I have come to realize is that I punish myself. I do enough to make my life miserable. I don’t need God to do that for me. Besides what parent, besides a sick parent, would want to make their children’s lives miserable?

I believe God is reaching for me. God always loves me but we can choose to live without God. I can choose to separate myself from God and certainly, that is hell. I know there are texts that speak of final judgment and condemnation of those who do not follow the will of God. But I also know texts that speak of how God will redeem the world. Maybe Richard John Neuhaus says it best, *“The church in her wisdom has not definitely settled these exegetical disputes.”*

I know I shouldn’t attempt to settle something that ultimately lies in the hand of God. I want to step back from anyone or any theology of condemnation. I have not been given the right. The fate of everyone’s soul is in God’s hands and that’s where I want to leave it. Yet, still, based on this story of the lost son, I have hope—hope that God is truly reconciling the world to himself.

OVERWHELMING GRACE

So what is my response to such grace? Note Simon Tugwell’s sharp observation:

We can only receive mercy if we re prepared to accept the company that Mercy places us in. It is no good wanting to be shown mercy and then reserving the right to look on disapprovingly at all the other fellows.⁵

Do you remember the parable? Do you remember what the father did when he saw his son coming down the road? He ran! It was improper for men in the Middle East to run. Aristotle said, ***“Great men never run in public.”*** This father runs. He throws his arms around his son and kisses him. So what is our response to those who have wronged us? As you watch this clip, ask yourself this question, ***“What would I have done?”***

CLIP: “Heart of Texas”

This clip was edited from four clips which can be found at www.wingclips.com. Type in “Heart of Texas” to view the clips.

The gospel story of the prodigal son has no end. I believe the end of the story is written by my life and my response to grace. How does the story end for you?

⁵Source Unknown.