

# The Waiting Father

Luke 15:1-2; 11-32

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

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 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. 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. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout 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 to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 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! I will get up 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 like one of your hired hands."' 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. 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.' 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. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. "Now his elder son was in

the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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.' "

**Introduction.** It was nearly midnight on Saturday and our then 17-year old son was not home following his shift at Chick-fil-a. The restaurant had closed at nine. Typically after the clean-up he would be home no later than eleven. His mother and I were anxiously awaiting his arrival. A few minutes after twelve, he entered the house and came into our room. Without a word of inquiry, he began to tell his story. He told us how a HS girl who worked at another restaurant in the food court had asked him if she could borrow his car. Swayed by her looks and request, he said yes. When it came time for Josh to leave, she had not returned his car. With the help of the police, we were able to recover the vehicle and Josh learned a valuable lesson about not lending his vehicle to beautiful women he hardly knew. (Most who have been parents of teens know what it is like to wait for a child to come home.)

The parable that was read tells of a father who waited on a son to return home. There are few stories that are more powerful than this one. It reaches many of us at a deep level of

our soul. This morning, I want to invite you to think about the waiting father, a title borrowed from Helmut Theilicke.

## Uniqueness.

There is no chapter in Luke that is more central to his understanding of Jesus' mission than this one. Luke believed that Jesus came to seek and to save those who were lost. In this chapter Luke shares Jesus' stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son(s). In Bishop Will Willimon's book, *Saved?*, he used this chapter as an anchor for his understanding of God's offer of grace to all humanity.

The three parables shared in Luke 15 come in reaction to a criticism by some of the religious leaders who observed what Jesus was doing. They complained that Jesus welcomed and ate with sinners.

This group of people tended to be exclusionists. They felt that true spirituality was measured by not only what one did but with whom a person would associate. One was spiritual if he or she associated with those who were spiritual and religious. Spiritual giants associated with spiritual giants.

It seems that this "exclusivism" held by the Pharisees is something that afflicts many who claim to follow Jesus in our day. Out of his research done for the Barna Group, David Kinnaman wrote a book entitled: *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*. Kinnaman asserts that most people outside the Christian Faith regard Christians as *judgmental*. From his research, he concludes that most people feel Christians maintain an attitude of "moral and spiritual superiority" (182). If we are perceived this way, it would good for us to hear the message of this parable. Let's examine this parable.

The parable of the lost son is unique in its opening line. In the story of the lost sheep, Jesus opens with the words: "Which one of you." In the story of the lost coin, he says, "What woman." These are common openings that you find in other Lucan stories and illustrations. Nearly every shepherd would go in search for one

sheep that is lost. It is irresponsible to think that a shepherd would not. Nearly every woman would do a thorough search to find something of great value she had lost in her home. It was easy for Jesus' audience to place themselves into the parable. For us in our time, we can still draw parallels. Women, if you lose a valuable piece of jewelry, what do you do?

In this trilogy of parables, the third is different – “*There was a man.*” Luke masterfully set up the story in such a way as to indicate that this man is not like most of us. He was a father who acts in ways that are not common to his culture (or ours). Jesus takes his audience to a new dimension. This father's graciousness and actions are extraordinary. He is a god-like father. He is talking about a father who loves God.

In this story, the younger son comes to his father requesting that he be given his share of his father's estate. When do heirs receive their portion of their inheritance? – following the death of their parents. In Jesus' time, rabbinic counsel instructed fathers not to give a son his portion before the father's death unless it related to the son's marriage. Most fathers would have refused the son's request. If you had a child come to you with this request, “What would you do?” (I might give a small loan or meet the need that stimulated this request but I would not give one of my sons his share.) But here in Jesus' story, this father grants the request. Quickly, the readers understand this father is unique.

In this father, we begin to see a reflection of our Father in heaven. He is a “father” who blesses us with many things in this life. He gives us “free will” to use what we have been given. He opens his hands of blessings both to the faithful and to the unfaithful. He does not use what we are given to manipulate us. Rather God allows us to use what we have according our choosing.

This can be puzzling to many. Jeremiah on one occasion brought these questions before God: *Why does*

*the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease (12:1)?* God gives us freedom to choose, even when the choices harm our relationship with God, our relationship with others and do harm to creation. In the story, the father's decision to give the son his inheritance opened the door for the son to go down a difficult path.

For a season, the younger son enjoyed himself with his father's inheritance. He lived for the moment and spent his resources on wild living. His lifestyle, marked by no meaningful relationships and a lack of discipline, led him to the bottom. When all of his resources were exhausted, he found himself in an economy turned upside down by a famine. Forced to look for a job, he could only find one at the bottom – caring for pigs. The wages were so low that he supplemented his diet by eating the pods, a type of carob, he was feeding to the pigs. (Many in our day can relate to this son's plight.)

As we hear this story, we must keep in mind that Jesus' audience (the Jewish religious leaders) would have been appalled to think that any Jew would stoop so low as to care for pigs. No respectable Jew would go near a pig that was considered unclean. To tend pigs was unheard of among the Jews.

Driven by his hunger and an understanding of his father's generosity, the prodigal son decided to return home. He knew that his father not only provided for his family but also provided generously for his hired hands. They had a superabundance of what they needed. This father provided good wages for those who worked for him. He was a generous man. This son was willing to become a hired hand, working for a generous employer.

How would the father react to this son when he arrived home? The son's actions had brought pain to the father's heart and reproach on his reputation. Proverbs 28:7b says: “*companions of gluttons shame their parents.*” How would you react to son who had acted in a similar manner? Would you

welcome him back without conditions? Would you make him prove himself? Would you reject him and say, “You made your bed, now lie in it?”

Let's turn our attention again to the father. In the first two parables, the hero was searching for that which was lost. In this parable, we find the father is somewhat more passive. Instead of searching and retrieving, this father is waiting. But his waiting is not entirely passive. He sees his son at a distance. The word for distance here can indicate a long walk of several miles or the distance one can see. This father may have walked several miles down the road, hoping to see his son. Or perhaps he was standing on his porch, scanning the horizon in hopes of seeing his son. Jesus' story makes it clear that this father longed for his child's return.

In NT Wright's book, *Simply Christian*, the author asserts that this is the pattern of the Bible and the Christian Faith – exile and return, rebellion and repentance. For those who return, they find a loving God who is waiting for them and sees them from a distance.

When the father saw his son, he did something that respectable men of his day did not do – he ran to greet his son. Running was not proper for a dignified man. (Isn't it amazing how love dwarfs dignity?) Not only did this father run to greet his son, he gave him a bear-hug and a kiss. Not only was this son religiously “unclean” because of his job of feeding pigs, he was physically unclean and probably smelled bad as well. He had been homeless and living among pigs. These conditions did not stop this father from expressing his love for his prodigal son.

This is the kind of father we have in heaven. When we come toward him, he comes to us. James expressed it in this way: “Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.” God does not regard our former condition or state. He comes with arms open to receive and to express his love.

When the father loosens his embrace, the son begins to recite his

rehearsed confession. It is interesting to note that the motivation for the son's return and his repentance are not of the highest order. They come out of desperate need. He does not seem to have a desire to have his relationship with the father restored. Despite the deficit confession, the father fully restores his son.

During annual conference, a pastor of one of the largest UM churches in the nation shared his testimony of coming to faith in Christ. Being a product of a broken home, he was not headed in a good direction. One afternoon, a man from an Assemblies of God came by his home to invite him to church. He decided to go. He found it very unusual and different from his RC and UM experiences. But he said he decided to return. His reasons: he saw two beautiful young girls near the front of the church, one of whom he married. Even though his motives were not of the highest religious order, God got hold of him and has used him significantly.

The father interrupted the son's confession and restored him fully in the home. He called for the best robe to be brought to him – perhaps the one that he had left behind. His old tattered clothes would be covered. He was given a ring for his finger which signified he had authority in the home. Sandals were placed on his feet. No one would see him as a homeless man who fed pigs but as the son of this father.

The father's final act was to throw a party for the son. He called for the fattest calf to be slaughtered. In a day when meat was not a common staple in the diet, killing the calf was significant. This son was an honored guest. The prodigal who had left home, disgraced his father, stooped to feeding pigs and become homeless was now the guest of honor.

*The older son.* If this story had ended at this point, it would have been a great parable. But Jesus continues and gives us part 2. This second part speaks directly to the opening of the chapter – the Pharisees and scribes

complained that Jesus welcomed and ate with sinners.

When the older brother saw there was a party taking place for his brother who had returned, he was upset. He refused to join the celebration. He felt it was not fair that his father would throw a celebration for his rebellious and irresponsible brother. Many would agree that he had a basis to be upset.

How would this father relate to his older son? First of all, the father went to him. Even though this son did not understand why his father would throw a party for his younger brother and even though he was upset, the father approached him. The father did not say, "If he refuses to come in, let him miss the party." Rather he went to him. This is a picture of how God often comes to us when we are upset by what we sometimes perceive to be his "unfair" expression of love.

The father listened to the older son complain. He did not condemn this son's attitude. He attempted to assure him that he was still fully invested as an heir. What was happening did not diminish his standing in the family.

The father urged him to come to the party. He wanted him to experience the joy of his brother's return. He had been lost and now he was found. There was great reason to celebrate.

### **Reacting to the Father's Great Love.**

The love of the Father in this story and our Father in heaven is amazing. Out of his love, he blesses his younger son and gives him freedom. He is a father who waits for and scans the horizon for his child's return. He welcomes home the prodigal with open arms and restores his position in the family. Then he throws a party to celebrate his return. But his love does not end there. When the older son is jealous and upset by his father's love toward his younger brother, the father goes to him, not to condemn, but to reassure him of his position in the family. The father invites the older son to the party.

How are we to relate to such a wonderful Father? We must join him

for the party. We must come in and celebrate. Will you join the Father for the celebration whether you are the prodigal or the older and loyal son?