



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 11, 2016

“The Running Father”

(Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)

Rev. David K. Groth

COLLECT: Lord Jesus, You are the Good Shepherd, without whom nothing is secure. Rescue and preserve us that we may not be lost forever but follow You, rejoicing in the way that leads to eternal life; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen

When we need to give Toby the dog a pill, we don't give it to him unconcealed. He'll just gag it out onto the floor and look at us as if we'd lost our minds. Instead, we'll tuck the pill into a piece of sausage, and present it to him as if it were the best doggy treat in Wisconsin. He receives it happily and asks if he might have another.

Similarly, this coming Wednesday, 6th, 7th and 8th grade confirmation begins. With the 6th grade class especially, we don't just start teaching raw, Christian doctrine. They would gag and cough and spit it out. No, in 6th grade we start by telling them stories. More specifically, Ron Wille retells many of the stories in the Bible. In so doing, he teaches them Christian doctrine without them really even knowing that's what he's doing. He tucks that pill into a wonderful piece of sausage.

We do that because Jesus did it all the time. Rarely did he ever speak in long, formal discourses. No, he used parables, captivating his listeners, but along the way, teaching them the truths of God. Matthew 13, "All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed He said nothing to them without a parable" (v. 34).

Today, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, there's a lot of doctrine packed into it. This isn't a parable that makes just one point. It makes many. It speaks of the nature of sin and how sin separates us from God, and wrecks our lives. It speaks of repentance, how that is turning away from sin and coming back to the Father. It speaks of God's unconditional love and his forgiveness, and how there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. It speaks of how the Father must also rescue those who look obedient and responsible on the

surface, but are just as lost and separated from God by their sin. Jesus packs a lot of doctrine into this little parable.

We can think of this parable as a three part play. Part One gives us the younger brother, the prodigal son. “Dad, I cannot wait for you to die. You’re still strong and sprightly after all, and by the time you kick the bucket, I won’t be young and vital enough to really enjoy the inheritance. So how ‘bout it? How ‘bout you give me my share today?” And, remarkably, the father does. He gives the boy his inheritance.

The young man takes off for the far country. Every age has its own peculiar “far country” and so does ours. Every individual has his/her own “far country” and so do you, some fantasy that tugs at you and pulls you away from your heavenly father. What’s your far country?

The lad takes his inheritance and runs off to his far country where he takes a long, voluptuous holiday. The text says he “squanders his property in reckless living.” I like the old translation: “riotous living.” Whatever else reckless and riotous living is, it is living only for the moment, which sounds so sexy and courageous, commendable even . . . until the economy tanks or there’s a famine. Then those “living only for the moment people” are the first to feel the pain, and they feel it the deepest and longest. That’s what befalls this young man. The inheritance is spent, he’s been evicted, his stuff has unceremoniously thrown into a pile by the curb, where it sits derelict in the rain. Within days, he’s so broke and hungry he’ll do anything for food. He had run to the far country in part to find himself. But now he finds himself feeding pigs.

His new four-legged companions are unclean in every way and not nearly as attractive as the two-legged companions who hung around him while he was “living in the moment.” But those friends are gone now. They have their own troubles; they don’t need to listen to his whining. So now it’s just pigs, everywhere pigs, who, also, only hang around him so long as he has pig-food in his pail. The boy is on the front edge of starvation; the scraps in his pail are

starting to look a Sunday buffet. That's when it dawns on him. "I will go back to my father and hope for the best." That's Part One.

Part Two is about the father. He loves both his boys; sometimes he just doesn't like them much. They stir up his anger like few others can, and make him wonder where he went wrong. However, both of them are his sons, and so he's bound to them inextricably. He could no more stop himself from loving them than he could stop the sun from shining. Moms and Dads, Grandpas and Grandmas, you know about this. You cannot help but love them, even though you may not like them all the time.

In the same way, have you ever considered the possibility that God may not like you much? Have you ever considered the possibility that you provoke your Father and stir up his anger because of the things you do and think and say? And though he is with you all the time, have you ever considered there may be times he doesn't enjoy being with you? Could it be he loves us not because we're so loveable but because he's our Father and is bound to us inextricably?

Someone said home is the one place where, when you arrive, they have to let you in. But this Father actually does something more for his prodigal son than just open the door. No, the father runs to his son. (I love that image.) The text says, "While his son was still a long way off, his father saw him and . . . ran." Of course he had lots of reasons to run from his son, but he ran to him. Picture him doing that, won't you. Picture him running down the lane as fast as his old legs will carry him, robes flying behind him. These days we see even old men running for exercise. In the ancient world, distinguished old men never ran, for anything or anyone. That's what servants were for. But when he sees his son, running to him is the only possible thing the father can do. It's an involuntary response. Quote, "He felt compassion for him . . . and embraced him and kissed him." He lavishes love on his son, and then orders the servants to bring gifts for him, and orders them to prepare the fattened calf. He does this all very publicly sending the signal to the

servants and whoever might have seen it, “this wretched, reprehensible young man who smells faintly of pigs . . . he’s still my son.”

That’s Part Two. Part Three is about the older brother, and he sounds to me a lot like a conservative Lutheran. We find him out in the field working. All along, he’s been doing that, tending the estate, keeping the farm afloat. When the younger brother took a long holiday from responsibility, the older brother absorbed the extra work into his own and kept the farm afloat. When the younger brother kept making poor decisions, the older brother kept making good decisions. So when he notices all the fuss his father is making over his younger brother, he gets a complicated mix of self-righteousness and anger and jealousy going on. See yourself in this older brother.

This poisonous cocktail of emotions crowds out any potential feelings for compassion or mercy. He’s so concerned about personal responsibility and accountability that there’s no room for grace in his world view. In fact, he is angry at his father for having compassion and grace. So he refuses to go into the house, and in doing so, he too has separated himself, excluded himself from his father’s presence.

When the father notices his older son hasn’t yet come in, he has to go out and bring him in, just as he did the younger. The father has to retrieve the older one too. “We simply must celebrate” he tells him. “For your brother was as good as dead, and is now alive. He was lost, and is found.” That’s Part Three.

Now a few thoughts about this parable in no particular order: First this: no one is too far gone. No one is so lost or wicked that he or she is beyond the reach of the Father. This Father can run to and forgive and restore anyone, anywhere . . . if they’ll let him.

And no one is so good and so dutiful, so responsible that he doesn’t need the Father. Sometimes our sense of having been good, our sense of pride and honor may even build walls between us and God. Said another way, if you

think your sin is small potatoes compared to the prodigals of the world, then you have a dinky little savior too.

Notice also how quick the father was to forgive. The prodigal had been planning to say more in terms of his confession, but he was never able to finish his speech because the father is already barking out orders . . . not at his son but at his servants: Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him, put a ring on his hand, shoes on his feet. Prepared the fattened calf! How our God loves to forgive!

That can be a hard one for us. We can get our minds around this notion of forgiveness so long as we know there's proper remorse and penitence and a heartfelt, "I'm sorry." But this seems different. This is a reckless, forgiving love that runs to the lost. This is a forgiveness that doesn't wait for the full apology. Nor did the Father make the prodigal go through the whole litany of sin. When God forgives us, he forgives us fast, and of far more than we will ever be able to recall and confess.

Do you remember what sparked this parable in the first place? The Pharisees were grumbling because Jesus was attracting to himself a whole bunch of sinners. They even called him "Friend of Sinners" and with this parable Jesus is, in effect, saying, "For once you got it right! That's who I am. I am 'Friend of Sinners' and that's why I've come: to forgive and restore and save sinners."

Sometimes we're more like the prodigals, having spent ourselves in sin, and now, having no one else to turn to, we come home to the Father. How good it is to know the Father still loves us, in spite of everything.

Sometimes we're more like the older brother: hard working, reliable, disciplined, smug, self-righteous, incapable of compassion. How good it is to know the Father still loves us too, in spite of everything.

See how these parables teach us doctrine? See how good a pill can taste to a dog when it's tucked into a bit of sausage?

One last thing: In the religion of the Pharisees, there is no running father who embraces and restores his son.

That's not how it worked. In ancient Judaism, sinners were shunned and disowned. The village elders would have had a ceremony of shame, known in Hebrew as "kezazah." They would have taken a clay pitcher and smashed it on the ground in front of the prodigal, meaning his ties with the community were broken and he was no longer welcome. But in running to meet his son, the Father gets to his son with the Gospel before they get to him with the Law. So there's no running father in the religion of the Pharisees.

And there is no running father in the religion of Islam. Islam teaches having mercy on a sinner means you don't have to punish them to the full extent of the law. But that's not the same as the Father running down the lane to forgive. Yet today, in some Muslim cultures women who commit adultery, or refuse to marry the husband arranged for them, or even women who are victims of a sexual assault, are seen as having brought great shame and dishonor on their families. Severe punishment is called for. Many women are brutally beaten, disowned, or disfigured with acid attacks. In 2010, police in the United Kingdom alone recorded 2823 such "honor crimes". The United Nations estimates there are about 5,000 of those every year, done by a male member of the family. Beating, stoning, cutting the throat, strangling, all for the sake of saving face and restoring the family's honor. The father in the parable isn't concerned about saving face. He's concerned about saving his son. The father in the parable restores honor by running down the lane, but is no running father in the religion of Islam.

And you won't find the running father in the religions of Buddhism or Confucianism, or Hinduism. You won't find the running father in any of the other religions of the world. He belongs only to this parable of Jesus.

If you need a God who loves you and forgives you in spite of everything, you will find him only in Jesus. If you need God to run to you, like a father with robes flying high, to embrace and forgive and restore you publicly as an heir, if you need a God who even celebrates and finds joy in your repentance, you will find him only in Jesus. He's the one who

runs down the lane. He's the one who meets us where we are. He's the one who blesses us with love and compassion and mercy. He's Friend of Sinners. He's the One who has opened his house to you and has prepared the best possible food for you. There is none other.

Our God runs! Amen.