

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, January 26, 2020

Hymns: 39 – God of Mercy, God of Grace; “Sanctuary”; 818 – O Jesus, Lord of Heavenly Grace; 670 - Amazing Grace / My Chains are Gone

Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

Sermon Title: The Lost Son, the Running Father

*Then Jesus told them this parable: ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” So he divided his property between them.*

*‘Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*‘When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.” So he got up and went to his father.*

*‘But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.*

*‘The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”*

*‘But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.*

*‘Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”*

*‘The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”*

*“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*

Who is this God we seek to serve, to know, to welcome into, inspire, and fill our lives? What does it mean to speak of God in terms of grace and generosity, compassion and hope? When it gets right down to it, what is this kind of God really like? Well, Jesus tells us a story – maybe the most famous story he ever tells – about just such a God. He doesn't tell us what the story is called, but over the years we've given it a title – the Prodigal Son.

But the story isn't about the son. It seems to start out with the son as the main character, but in the end all we learn about the son is that he's capable of the kind of selfish short-sighted decision-making that we as parents watch our own adolescent children make. Actually, I wish that kind of decision-making was limited to adolescent children, but it seems as though many in our world, to the highest levels, are capable of selfish short-sighted decisions. So when it comes to the son, really, we're not learning anything new. It's the same old story played out in a thousand different ways. Selfish attitude, unreasonable demands, irresponsible actions, a series of decisions leading to obvious but unforeseen consequences, and suddenly there you are, envying the pigs their supper.

It isn't even primarily about the second son in the story, the son we often forget. He was there in our reading earlier; he's really deserving of a sermon on his own. But that's for another day. For now, let me sum him up with his own title: rather than "The Prodigal Son," you could call his story "The Parable of the Resentful Brother." Maybe we'll deal with him next week. Unless it snows!

Kennon Callahan, the great teacher, mentor, and congregational inspirer, doesn't like either title. He prefers a different title altogether. Rather than "The Prodigal Son," or "The Resentful Brother." He prefers, "The Parable of the Running Father." And you know, he's got a point. Because of everyone in the story, the Running Father is the only one who doesn't do what everyone expects - who doesn't do what anyone expects - but who does what God would do. And does. Let me first recap a bit of the story for you, and then tell it like Callahan does:

It seems a son has demanded of his father his share of the family inheritance; as the younger brother, he is entitled to one third of the estate, two thirds going to the elder brother. I can just hear him now: "Well, dear old Dad, I don't want to be one of those children waiting around for their father to die so they can have his money. I want it now. Remember, you can't take it with you, Dad. So I am going to take it from you." The father, doubtless touched by this display of affection, decides to grant his son's request. He divides the property into thirds, and gives his son his share. No sooner does the boy get the land, but he puts it on the market, and turns it into ready cash, and off he goes, bright lights and big cities ahead.

How he spends the money would make a great miniseries, and not a bad sermon, with the title “Wine, Women and Song.” He spends it “prodigally” – the definition of which is, “spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully lavish.” Or as the formal old King James puts it, (Luke 15:13) *“And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.”* But finally some justice: again from the King James, which adopts just the right sort of, “I told you so” tone (Luke 15:14-16): *“And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.”*

Now, of course, the crying starts; the young pup, sober now, remembers how good life had been, and how the old man had not been such a bad sort after all, how even the hired hands had it pretty good, really. He works out a plan in his mind, where he says he is sorry, and where he hopefully strikes a deal with Dad to be hired on, if not as management, perhaps in some line where at least he might make ends meet.

So back he goes, and in the distance, shimmering in the heat of the day, he begins to see the outline of home. Closer now, he sees a figure standing alone at the end of the driveway, scanning the horizon. The figure looks his way, and gathering up his skirts, begins to run towards the boy. It is his father, and, panting and puffing from the excitement and the exertion, he, as the King James puts it, *“fell on his neck,”* and... And what? Fell on his neck and choked him? Fell on his neck and beat some sense into the boy? Fell on his neck and said “I thought I would never see your filthy ungrateful hide around here again, and I better not see it, or I will tan it till it glows?” Or, memories from my own childhood, “Look, boy, I brought you into this world, and I can take you out. Doesn’t matter to me, I can make another one just like you.” No. Instead, this:

*“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; **and he ran** to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”*

Not what we expect. Nor does the son, doubtless. He doesn’t even get a chance to stammer out his plan for working his way back into favour, when the father interrupts:

*“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”*

*“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.*

Of all the words in that parable, let’s take our cue from Kennon Callahan and notice, above all, these three: **“And he ran…”** These are words of Grace. These are among the most remarkable words in the Bible.

*While the young son was yet a long way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, **And he ran**, and threw his arms around his son, and called for the best robe, and a ring, and sandals... “For this my son was dead and now is alive, He was lost and now is found.”*

Callahan writes:

The father did not stay in the house, with the door closed, refusing to see his son. He did not wait in the doorway, begrudgingly, bitterly. He did not walk slowly toward his son, reluctantly, uncertainly. He did not turn his back. He could have done any of these things. But he didn’t. He ran. He ran to his son. He ran.

The Good News of the Gospel of Grace is this: While we are yet a long way off, God sees us... and has compassion... and runs to us.

God runs to us. God’s grace runs to us. God puts arms of grace around us, calls for the cloak of compassion, the ring of community, and the sandals of hope. God welcomes us home. We were dead, and now we are alive. We were lost, and now are found.

This is the parable of the Loving Father... the loving, running Father.

The parable tells us more about the father than the son. What we know about the young son is that he lost his inheritance in the far country and decided to return home. Nothing new there. What is new is what we learn about the Father. We learn most about the father. We discover the nature of the father. We are amazed at the grace of the father toward his younger. He shares his love and grace with him.

From beginning to end, the Bible speaks to us of the Father’s grace and love. Our God is the God of the heavens and the stars, light years and galaxies,

black holes and shooting stars, comets and constellations, suns and moons, solar systems and new heavens.

The stars are the sacramental sign of the immensity of God's grace. Our God creates the universe as immense as it is so we will know how immense the grace of God is for us. We are blessed with the unending immensity of the Grace of God. This is the God who runs to you.

Our God comes in a manger, as a baby, to teach us the immediacy, the closeness of God's grace for you. Shepherds and wise men gather. A mother and father are quietly blessed. Kings and princes, soldiers and warriors are not present. This coming of grace is for everyday, ordinary people. This is the God who runs to you.

Our God comes as the loving, running Father who welcomes us home. We are blessed with both the immensity and immediacy of God's grace. We are blessed with the grace of God. This is the God, Jesus says, who we call, "Father."

Live your life in the grace of God. Live each day in the grace of God. Have this confidence; know this assurance: God does not close the door. God does not wait in the house. God does not walk slowly. God does not turn his back.

God runs. Grace runs. The grace of God runs to you. The grace of God surrounds you. The grace of God sustains you. The grace of God leads you. The grace of God heals you. The grace of God calls you, welcomes you home.

Your future... our future... this congregation's future are blessed with the grace of God.

Maybe you've had heartache. Maybe you've had loss. Maybe you have regrets, disappointments, setbacks, failures, pain. Maybe you've been let down time and again, by yourself, by others, by life. Friends, you have a Father. And your Father loves you. And your Father will never stop loving you. And Your Father is calling you, welcoming you, home.

Who is this God we seek to serve, to know, to welcome into, inspire, and fill our lives? What does it mean to speak of God in terms of grace and generosity, compassion, forgiveness, hope? When it gets right down to it, what is this kind of God really like?

This is who God is. This is what God is like. This is the God we call Father. This is the God who runs to you. Who embraces you. Who forgives you. Who surrounds you with his love. Receive his grace. Be renewed by his grace. Be restored through his grace. Come home. Come home.

Amen.