

9-29-19 SERMON CCI Luke 15: 24-32 The Older Brother: Gospel for Good People

Last Sunday we read about a dinner gathering with Jesus, some Pharisees, and some tax collectors and sinners Jesus had invited. The Pharisees complained that Jesus would eat with such ... sinners. And Jesus responded with 3 parables- a sheep owner who finds his lost sheep, a woman who finds her lost coin, and the father who watches until he finally finds his lost son coming home. In each parable, they threw a party to celebrate. Jesus compared these celebrations to the parties in heaven whenever a sinner repents. We heard the good news that God is like the sheep owner, the woman and the father and runs to meet us when we repent and come home. Such happy endings to these parables... Or are they?

This morning we heard Woody read what commentator Paul Harvey would call “the rest of the story” of the Prodigal Son. But let’s remind ourselves of that 3rd parable: A man had two sons. The younger son insulted his father by demanding his inheritance NOW; he didn’t want to wait for his father’s death. So the father divided his inheritance between his two sons. The younger son got 1/3 of his father’s worth in spendable money. The rest of everything the father had then belonged to his older son. The younger son left and lived a great life until the money ran out and a famine came. Then he decided to come home and ask forgiveness and work as a hired servant, because he didn’t deserve to be called a son. But his father was watching the horizon for him, and when he saw him, ran to welcome him home. The lost was found.

We pick the story back up with the huge party the father threw for his once-lost-but-now-found son. The happy father has invited all his friends and neighbors to celebrate with a huge feast. His son has been given new clothes, new shoes, and a family ring for the welcome home party. Can you see and hear the party? The father going from table to table greeting his guests and telling the story over and over, music playing, people dancing, glasses clinking, people laughing, lifting their glasses with happy toasts, “He’s alive again!” “Long live the prodigal son!”

The sounds are so loud that as the father’s older son comes in from a hard day’s work managing his land and crops, and as he looks forward to a peaceful dinner and a restful evening, he wants to know what’s going on. There was no party on the plan for the day.

A servant tells him his younger brother has come home! Expecting a joyful response. But instead of joining the celebration, the older brother is offended and refuses to come in. Even when his father leaves his guests to come outside to

plead with him, “Don’t be rude, don’t embarrass me, join the party.” With his voice rising so all could hear, the older son blasts his father:

- You’re throwing a party for “that son of yours?” He wouldn’t even claim him as his brother.
- I’ve worked like a slave for you all my life and you never threw me even a small party as a thank you. I’ve been the obedient son, and never disobeyed you. Where’s your gratitude for me? Don’t I matter?
- You throw him a party after he squandered your inheritance and lived a life that put a blight on our family’s reputation? I won’t come.

But the father gently says, “But everything I have is already yours. I gave you your inheritance at the same time I gave your brother his. Of course, you matter! You’re my precious son too. But your brother once was lost and now is found; was dead and is alive. We have to celebrate!

Luke doesn’t tell us whether the older son ever joined the party, or just stood outside pouting and angry. He leaves it to the listeners at Jesus’ dinner to decide. What would the Pharisees have heard in this story? After all, in their eyes, they’re the ones who have been obedient, they’re the good and faithful ones, like the older brother. They resented Jesus’ attention to the sinners. Pastor Fred Craddock beautifully describes the older brother’s attitude like this:

“Of course, let the younger brother return home. Judaism and Christianity have clear provisions for the restoration of the penitent returnee, but where does it say that such provisions include a banquet with music and dancing? Yes, let the prodigal return, but to bread and water, not fattened calf; in sackcloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a new ring; in tears not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing.”¹ Don’t we feel that way too sometimes? They also would have agreed with the older brother in the video this morning who asked, “Doesn’t it matter?” Doesn’t sin matter?

Then Jesus lets it slowly dawn on us that, in his righteous anger, the older brother insulted his father too. Stole his father’s joy at his lost son coming home, refused to obey his father just like his brother did, falsely accused his father of neglecting his needs and not appreciating his hard work, and turned his back. Shamed his father in front of all their listening guests. Focusing on another’s sins can blind us to our own. It’s why Jesus said, “Take the plank out of your own eye;

¹ Craddock, Fred B. Luke: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, 188.

then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."² Last Sunday I asked, "Can a righteous person be lost?" I believe the answer is yes. The good older brother may never have strayed away from home, but he was as estranged from his father as his younger brother had been. It's a tale of 2 lost sons. One found and one...

The more I've pondered this part of this parable, the more I see the need to forgive and extend grace as the heart of the story. Let's remember that Jesus told this parable for the Pharisees who thought sinners didn't belong at Jesus' table. Maybe, like the older son in the video, they believed people never really change. Once a sinner, always a sinner, and only a sinner. Even if they've been forgiven by God. And let's be honest; forgiveness is hard stuff. The word translated forgive means to cancel a debt, to pardon, or to wipe the slate clean. It doesn't mean you have to forget a wrong in order to forgive; but it does mean you stop holding it over someone's head and let it go. That's hard. It's easier to choose to look at a person only through the lens of the wrong that person did or something they did not do but should have, and stand at a distance and hold them to their sin debt, and refuse to allow them back into our good graces.

But remember the one part of the Lord's Prayer we prayed a few moments ago about forgiving? Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. We pray it so easily. Yet, a clearer translation would be "Forgive us our debts in the same way and to the same extent that we forgive others." That's a dangerous thing to pray, friends! "Lord, forgive me only as much I forgive others?" Why would Jesus put that there for us to pray, knowing how we struggle to forgive? Because real forgiveness is what God has done for us- when we confess our sins, he wipes the slate clean, releases us from our debt, and pardons us. Because Jesus already paid our debt on the cross. Paid it in full with his own life. We forget that Jesus also paid the debt for everyone else's sin there too. That debt we're holding against someone? It's already paid for. So why are we holding onto it?

From time to time, we see pictures of Amish families riding in their horse-drawn buggies trying to share the road with gas-driven vehicles in PA. It's estimated that a horse-drawn buggy drives about 8 miles an hour. Which is a challenge for drivers of cars and trucks. On January 14, 2000, in Webster County, PA, 44 year old Leah Graber was driving her buggy to take one of her 13 children to the doctor. A logging truck passed her in a no-pass zone and struck the buggy,

² Matthew 7: 5

killing Leah. The truck driver, named Marvin, fled the scene. During the sentencing portion of his conviction 3 months later, Leah Graber's husband and 38 other members of the Amish community sent a letter to the judge. The letter stated this: *"Our past, we cannot change, but our future we can strive for betterment. We feel to better ourselves with this terrible accident is to forgive, forget, and go on to a better future and help and respect one another. . . We plea to let Marvin stay here and help his family and us in the future."* The judge listened and sentenced Marvin to 5 years' probation with 500 hours of community service to the Amish community. During his community service, Marvin became a changed man.

Forgiveness and restoration is hard, friends. I pray none of us will ever need to forgive such a tragedy. But we all are called to forgive many things. Hurtful words, neglecting our needs, physical harm, emotional harm, theft, unfaithfulness, lying, slander, gossiping behind our back, and the list goes on. What debts are we holding onto? When we refuse to forgive, we've joined the older son. When we want our pound of flesh first, we'll forgive alright but only when they come crawling, we've joined the older son. When we respond to people's bad behavior with more bad behavior, we've joined the older son. When we find it hard to join the party to celebrate God's grace to another person, we've joined the older son.

As we pause to reflect on our place in this story, are there people we need to forgive? Are we holding onto a past wrong so that it colors how we see a person, how we treat them? Are we letting something someone did in the past govern whether we trust people now? Have there been hurtful words said in this very room that need acknowledgment and forgiveness so you can move forward together as a congregation? Have you said things more harshly than needed? It's never too late to apologize. Are you holding onto something someone else said or did? It's never too late to go talk it through and forgive.

Friends, I don't want anyone to miss the party God has in store. If you were in the wrong, let this week be the week you make it right. And if you're an injured party, let this week be the week you talk it through, forgive, and let it go. Then you can all come in and join the party.