

Luke 15:11-32

"Spiritual Fatherhood"

There is an old Trisha Yearwood song that came to my mind as I was reading the story of the Prodigal Son. As many times as I have read or heard this familiar parable, Trisha Yearwood had never entered my mind so I took that to be the Holy Spirit. She sings, "Had I known my heart would break, I would have loved you anyway." I wonder if that is how the father in Jesus' story felt about his two sons. And more importantly, I wonder if that is how God feels about you and me.

I believe that when we read the parables, there are often clear analogies about who and what the players in the story represent. But this parable is different. Because I can see a little of myself in each of the characters. And I am betting you can too.

The younger brother is impatient and anxious to conquer the world by breaking out of the mold of what culture calls him to do. Some might say he was irresponsible, thoughtless, and immature. Others might call him adventurous or idealistic. Maybe even a little before his time.

After all, Steve Jobs was a college drop-out who travelled and experimented with drugs before becoming the co-founder of Apple, providing thousands of jobs and literally changing the world. Mark Zuckerberg dropped out of Harvard at 20 and founded Facebook, changing the way we all communicate. And while *their* stories may not represent the norm, I am sure they probably upset a few apple carts when they first began their journeys. Yet, who among us has never made a bad choice, used bad judgment, or disappointed someone we love? ***We are all just perfectly, imperfect human beings.***

However, I have always related to the elder son. I am the one who usually does what I should. Act responsibly. Take care of others. But isn't that how we raise our firstborn?

Psychologist Kevin Leman is quoted in "Parenting" magazine as saying, "Adults take firstborns seriously and boost their confidence, creating overachieving perfectionists." He recounts that at a corporate seminar he conducted for CEO's, 19 of the 20 were firstborns.

But as we can see from the reactions of the elder brother, the curse of the firstborn is that we can also be self-righteous. Jealous. Angry. Maybe even a little cranky at times. Living up to everyone else's expectations can be rather exhausting, if the truth be told. I can say these things because reading the story again this week led me to confront my own self-righteousness and helped me realize how resentful I am sometimes that doing what is right often does not get noticed or mentioned.

But I believe Jesus tells this parable because whether you are the bossy firstborn, the spoiled baby or the middle child just stuck in the middle, Jesus is calling us *all* to be more like the father. And as we celebrate Father's Day, let's take a look at the gifts that this father offers to both of his children. Because in the end, this passage might better be named The Parable of the Father's Love.

If you are a parent, a teacher or anyone who has to help young people navigate their way in this increasingly difficult and complicated world, you can imagine what the father was feeling when the son came and asked for his inheritance early so he could go out into the world and find himself. The father, I am sure, wanted to use his authority to hold his son back. To warn him of the many dangers out there, just waiting to take advantage of him. To make predictions about his sure failure to come. But the father's love for his son is too great to do *ANY* of that. In fact, his love makes him powerless to prevent his son's pain.

In his wisdom, the father knows that if he demands the son to live by HIS ideals of what makes life fulfilling, he will lose him altogether. So instead, he loves him enough to set him free and prays that he will CHOOSE to come to his senses. And how like our *Heavenly* father he is. Everyone in this sanctuary, no matter how young or old, wise or foolish, responsible or carefree, has had to try something on our own to find out that is doesn't work. And it has been my experience that I learn the most from my own mistakes and not just from hearing about others'.

Did you know that if you quit feeding an alligator he will roar like a lion? Well, I do. You see, when I was young, my family used to vacation at Hilton Head Island, back in the day before it had really been discovered. We went every summer with another family and rented cottages side by side and fished and crabbed and wandered around the beaches and ponds of the undeveloped island.

One evening at dusk, I decided to take a hotdog off the grill before dinner and eat it as I wandered down to the lagoon behind our house. I was about 8 years old. There I encountered an alligator who was resting after dinner but he was very interested in my hotdog. So I began to break off small pieces and throw it to him. When the hotdog was done, good old Ally decided his appetite had not been satisfied and it must have only been adrenaline that helped me beat him to the screen door that my mother held open in horror when she saw what was happening. However, he did stand there for quite a while outside out porch and roar like a lion, asking for more.

This is a true story although a rather silly analogy but I can say with assurance that I will NEVER feed an alligator anything again. There are many other lessons that I learned the hard way that I would rather not share because they paint such an unflattering picture of me but I

think you get my point. And it actually leads me to the second beautiful quality about the love of the father.

Just as my mother stood with the screen door wide open, beckoning me to come to her, the father in today's story waited patiently until the son "Came to himself", to quote Luke's Jesus. And friends, God, from the beginning of time has allowed his children to wander and waited with outstretched arms in merciful blessing. God never lets his arms drop but waits, always hoping, that his children will return. And God's hands extend in every movement of our journey whether we recognize them or not.

God's hands molded each of us in our mother's womb into just the beautiful children that we are, every one of us in our own way. God's hands welcomed us at birth. I have personally felt God's hands hold me as I have wept, protect me in times of danger, encourage me when I have been uncertain, wave good-bye to me as I journeyed out of the boundaries of God's will and welcome me home when I returned to God's plan. And I pray that you have too.

The Father of the Prodigal did the same. In fact, Jesus tells us that when he saw his son returning over the horizon, dirty, thin, almost unrecognizable in his dismay and stinking from the filth of his poor choices, the father ran to him. This may seem like a logical reaction to us. In the first century, however, a Middle Eastern man never — never — ran. If he were to run, he would have to hitch up his tunic so he would not trip. Of course, this would show his bare legs, something humiliating and shameful for a man in his culture. Yet the father of the Prodigal let his joy outweigh his humiliation.

And isn't that what our God did on the cross? Jesus took away our sins by dying. But he didn't die a noble death. He died like a common criminal, taking on our shame so that we could live in Eternity with the father. God could have chosen any number of ways to bring us

atonement for our sinfulness, yet he chose to humiliate himself, stooping to the lowest level of humanity to bring us home. In this parable, Jesus reminds us that when sin and forgiveness embrace, the human and the Divine become one. The parable allows each of us, when we have squandered the gifts that God has given us, to kneel down and be held by a forgiving God.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Father of the Prodigal is his lack of admonishment. Not once does he say, "I told you so!" or "I just knew you would come home, begging for forgiveness". Why, he hardly allows his misguided son to deliver the speech that he practiced all the way from the pig sty.

Instead, Jesus tells us that he was filled with compassion. A word that literally means "with suffering". The father felt the pain of his son and knew that he had been punished enough by his own waywardness. So he chose instead to let him know that he had found his way back to his everlasting home. Then Jesus reminds us that rejoicing is not enough in the economy of God. The father calls for the fatted calf to be killed, the party clothes are brought out and the celebration begins as love and grace abound.

When I think about the party that was thrown for this sinful son, I think about a phrase that a friend of mine uses all the time. She likes to say that she lives with "an embarrassment of riches". And don't we all? Our Heavenly Father has shown us time and time again that we do not receive what we deserve - that is, condemnation. Instead, we have received abundant life, riches after riches. Too many to count.

And the father shows grace to the self-righteous elder son too. Instead of admonishing him for wanting an award because he simply followed the rules, the father reassures him that he would have done the same for him. Perhaps this part of the story teaches one of the most important yet often missed lessons about grace. Jesus teaches that forgiving someone does NOT

mean that you are saying that what they did wasn't wrong or hurtful. Just that YOU have made the choice to move beyond it. Because whether we need to forgive someone else or, even harder, ourselves, we all know that when our hearts are feasting on the unforgiveness of what has been done, licking our lips over grievances long past, the carcass at the table is ourselves. What you are devouring is you. And being unable to forgive is a prison that only we can free ourselves from, with God's help.

On this Father's Day, I know that everyone here was not blessed to have a stern but supportive father like I do. My father is my hero and a role model of integrity. But I am aware that there are many who have no father. That many only have memories of abusive fathers, strained or competitive relationships with their fathers, absentee fathers and more. But the reason that I chose to examine this parable today is twofold.

First, whether you are the younger son or the elder son, God calls us all to *become* the Father. God models for us to welcome that child who has sinned without wanting anything in return. With no questions asked. Truly to give grace that is free. God teaches us compassion and unconditional love in his reactions to BOTH sons. And God paints a word picture of everlasting forgiveness. Indeed, God, like Trisha Yearwood helps us believe that even when he KNOWS we will break his heart, he chooses to love us anyway.

But even more than all of these lessons, I believe that the parable of the Prodigal reminds every one here that we are *made* the son but as we grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ, we *become* the father. And by this we are made ready for Eternal Life. (1) In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf
Nazareth Presbyterian Church, June 18 2017

(1) With thanks to Henri Nouwen, [The Return of the Prodigal](#), Doubleday, NY, NY, 1994.