

The Prodigal Son

By: Penny Holste

March 6, 2016. Are we tempted to push our relationship with God aside and trust only in ourselves? In talking about Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) Pastor Penny shows us that we can make the world a place of justice and mercy, passing on a legacy for sons who have been lost, by knowing that God forgives and loves us and by trusting in Him.

*** Transcript ***

We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Friday Keith and I went to a very moving presentation at Eden Seminary. There were about a dozen men, all African American, who were recounting how they lost their sons to a violent death. The deaths were different. Sometimes it was gang-related. Sometimes it was related to the police. There was one death that had mysterious circumstances around it. There were men waiting to get court documents to get more details about their son's death. There were other men waiting to get a day in court to talk more about their son's death. And this presentation had two goals. I could tell that they were all waiting for justice. And that was one of the goals, to encourage the African American community and the white community to provide more justice for African Americans. But the other goal was to pass on a legacy for the sons they have lost — because it became very evident, when you heard one testimony after another, how much these men loved their sons, and how hurt they were to lose them.

Jesus told a story, a parable about a man who loved two sons. And they were very different from one another. If we can fill in the details (because this is a story after all) we can maybe imagine that the youngest son was kind of cocky. He didn't really want to get up in the morning and go help on the farm, and he chafed at having to be under his father's supervision. Maybe he was like Joseph and he had these dreams, of getting out on his own and creating his own life and making his own success and being his own boss. So one day, he made an unthinkable request of his father, unthinkable in his culture. He said, Father give me my inheritance. Now that was tantamount to wishing his father dead in his culture. It was a cruel thing. He wasn't thinking about his father's feelings. It was a selfish thing, as we were talking about selfishness. And another unthinkable thing was that the father gave him what he asked! He sold his half of the property and gave his son the money — not maybe a very wise thing, but he loved his son.

Well, we know what happened after that. The son went away, and despite all his great dreams, he ended up frittering away the money, all of the money, all of his father's hard-earned money. And only when he was starving did he have second thoughts about what he had done. And then he hatched a plan to come back and ask to work on his father's farm. What the boy didn't know, because he really wasn't thinking about his father the whole time, was that even after what he had done to his father, his father never stopped loving him. And we know that because when the young man approached from a distance, before a word of apology had come out of his mouth, his father ran to him, had compassion on him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. And I think the cover on the bulletin is very telling. You can imagine this young man just collapsing into his father's arms, his head on his shoulder, maybe bursting into tears — and at that moment, maybe for the first time, realizing what he had almost lost, at that moment realizing for the first time that he had almost lost his most precious possession: the love of his father.

Now there was an older son as well. And he (if we can embellish a little) I think it's safe to say he probably hated to get up and go to work in the field as well, as his younger brother had. He probably chafed under the supervision of his father and wanted to call the shots. But he waited. His tactic was to wait. He knew sooner or later he would inherit half the property and then he would be his own boss. So his role was to be the good son. He bit his tongue instead of saying things that he might. He mumbled under his breath. He wasn't happy, but he waited. In fact, he was probably happy when his younger brother made that cruel statement about his property and taking his money, because he thought finally, my father will see what a brat my little brother was, and we'll be rid of him. But when that brat came back and the father reinstated him as if nothing had happened, the older son was outraged. It was not fair, I'm sure he said. And it wasn't. His father wasn't being fair. He wasn't showing justice. He was going beyond justice to mercy. And then the older son said something I'm sure that hurt the father so deeply. He said, all my life I've been slaving for you. And the father must have thought: is that what it was like, is that what you thought you were doing? I thought we were working together and that everything I had was yours. For the older son couldn't see it, and didn't care and wouldn't celebrate.

Now it's important to notice the first verses in our gospel today. They come before the story. "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable." This story is for the scribes and Pharisees. And they were the good sons in their day. Oh, they had a relationship with their Heavenly Father, but they had pushed it to the side and were focusing on their role. Their role was to keep the laws. They believed that would please the Father, and then God would bless the whole nation. But in the process, their focus, their trust was on what they were doing, on being the good sons.

And I wonder sometimes if that isn't our temptation, too. Because we are good people. We are good churchgoers. We are good wives and husbands and mothers and children and fathers and workers and students and citizens, and we have a relationship with God. It's important. But do we push that to one side, and do we focus instead on who we are and what we do? Is that what we trust? I wonder if God is not saying to us this morning: don't be more sure of yourself than you are of me. Don't trust yourself more than you trust me, or you will never really know me, and you will never have the joy I intend you to have, and you will never work side by side with me in the kingdom. The joy I intend you to have. As Pastor Keith mentioned, this is Laetare Sunday in the tradition of the church year, from the Latin word for joy, rejoice. And I have to believe that if we could hear the story of the younger son after he came back, it would be full of joy. I can imagine him waking up and wanting to go to work, being so happy to have a roof over his head and three meals a day. I can imagine him seeing his dad for the first time and really knowing him, noticing how carefully his father treated the hired hands and the slaves. And he had been a hired hand, so it would mean a lot to the young boy, noticing that maybe his father left some of the crop so that the poor could come and glean it. And he had been poor, and it would mean a lot to see that, seeing maybe for the first time that his father was the greatest possession he had: the gift of his father's love, and how eager he was to live out that same lifestyle and legacy.

This is what God offers us today, that we too can collapse into the loving arms of a Heavenly Father, confessing our weaknesses, knowing that we are forgiven, hearing words of love, and hearing our Father say to us: I'm so glad you came back home. Now you can have the joy I intended you to have. Now we can work together to make the world a place of justice and mercy.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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