

For God So Loved Fourth Sunday in Lent

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

1. The Son tells the Father, "I wish you were dead."
2. The Father has radical generosity.
3. The Father is patient.
4. The Father is compassionate.
5. The Father forgives lavishly.
6. The Father loves extravagantly.
7. The Father is God.

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Lent 2019: For God So Loved 4¹

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

It never ceases to amaze me how strongly we all seek our father's approval, no matter how old we are, no matter if our fathers are still with us or not, and no matter whether the relationship was healthy or dysfunctional; it's just part of human nature.

In our previous church I had become good friends with a very significant leader in the community. As our friendship developed, he became a part of my small accountability group of guys – four of us – who meet once a week in the early morning. In those meetings, he would share about how harsh and abusive his father was, and that no matter what he did as a son, no matter what success he achieved, it was never good enough for his father, and whenever he failed at something, it simply seemed to confirm what his father thought of him. His father had passed away years before, yet he was *still* striving to please his father. No doubt, that was part of his achievements as a significant community civic leader. Everyone in the community looked to him for direction, for a sense of security, and for his opinion on things. He was even recognized and featured nationally for his strong leadership.

But his own insecurity with his father, coupled with some PTSD, led to his unraveling, despite the best efforts of his counselors, our small group and his friends. He lost his family, his marriage, and he began drinking. I'll never forget one pivotal 36-hour period. I had been with him at his office one afternoon, checking up on him to see how he was doing. We prayed together. He seemed like he was doing okay. At around 11pm the next night, I got a call to come visit him in jail. He had been arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct and for threatening his ex-wife. He was a shell of the man he'd been just 36 hours ago; a drunken, crying, heap on a jail cell floor. That jail cell was a mere quarter mile from his office – a short walk, but a long fall. His unresolved father issues weren't the only reason, but they were probably the primary, underlying factor.

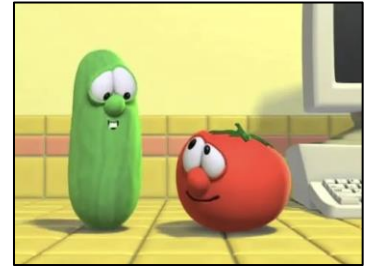
(I can tell you that story partly because the man has since passed away, but also because his falls, and his subsequent struggles, were public news and knowledge, and while he was alive and in recovery he let me share his story.)

As you hear that tragic story, you probably cringe and feel terrible for him...but I'll bet it also strikes a chord in you, doesn't it? Somewhere inside you – don't you, too,

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find yourself wanting to know that you have your father's approval? We *all* do, even if we know we already have it.

And there's a reason I share that story with you, because it has a great deal to do with our Scripture today. The Scripture story that was read for us has been told numerous times. It is displayed in paintings hung in the most prestigious art museums around the world. It has been retold in every format from novels to cartoon vegetables.



The danger of stories that become so familiar to us is that we tend to look at them the *same way*, with the same eyes. We tend to approach them with the same biases and come away from them with the same understandings. Even if the story is retold by a cartoon cucumber and his tomato friend, we still hear the lessons the *same way*.

We tend to view this story by focusing on the prodigal son. We think about the story of the son who left the riches of his father's home to go out on his own, where he ended up squandering everything he had and, becoming desperate, ended up feeding the pigs and being forced to return home.

Or, we may have also viewed this as a story of two brothers. The older one is more responsible but less loving: jealous of the grace so freely given to his reckless younger brother. The older brother could have asked to receive his inheritance as well, but he chose to stay home and help manage the property, something that would have been expected of the older brother. So the older brother thinks that he's earned his father's love.

These approaches to the story are both good ones, and both have ways to challenge us into deeper discipleship with Jesus.

But, since it is Lent – a season that's supposed to be a time of repentance and growth – what if we take some time to repent of our biases? What if we quit living off of yesterday's revelation of that Scripture, and what if we read this story anew – with the intent to grow? What if we look at this story with new eyes, in a new way? Remember that last week we said that repentance also included gaining a new attitude and perspective. Maybe we should repent from relying on old information and ask God to speak to us in new ways.

This story is unlike any other story that Jesus told. It is both physically and theologically in the middle of Luke's Gospel.² It is by far the longest parable Jesus told, which should tell us how important it was to Jesus for us to hear it. It is the third in a succession of stories about something that is lost, and the desperate search to find it; abandoning all other things until it is found. You know that in the Bible anytime something is repeated three times it means it is important; that its truth is established.

² David A. Neale, *Beacon Bible Commentary, Luke 9-24: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, MO, 2013) pp. 138-144

So given how important the story is, what if, instead of looking at this story and focusing on the prodigal son, defining it by the ways the son has failed, by the ways he has been selfish, the things he has squandered, and what he has lost...what if, instead of looking at this story and focusing on the two brothers, one defined by his recklessness and the other by his jealousy...what if, instead, we look at this as *the story of the loving father*? If we do that, I think we will gain something new. So with that in mind, let's first understand that by asking for his inheritance early...

1. The Son tells the Father, "***I wish you were dead.***"

Asking for one's inheritance is like saying "things would be better without you here." That's the only reason a father would give up his inheritance early. In Jewish culture, in Jewish clans and families, and in Jewish economy, a father would *never* give up his inheritance to his son before he died. It was the expectation that Jewish men would control their estate while they were alive. So it would have been incredibly shameful for a son to request his inheritance before the father's death.

But that also means that, while it was shameful for the son to ask for his inheritance early, it would have been equally shameful, if not more so, for the father to *actually give* the inheritance to his son.

In rare cases, the father might divide his land for his sons to *manage* while he was still alive, but even if the father did, it would still be under the authority of the father, just to make sure none of the sons risked losing their entire family's wealth. That wealth was intended to serve multiple generations. But even then, to give his heirs any of their inheritance would be entirely the father's choice; it would never be the children's place to ask for it.

So the fact that the father even gave it to the son in the first place shows that...

2. The Father has ***radical generosity.***

What's amazing is that, even though the idea of the father giving up that money to the son was so unheard of, the story gives no indication that the father ever even remotely asked the intentions of the son. Despite the fact that shame would be brought on the father for doing it, he is still generous to his son. In spite of the son essentially telling the father, "I wish you were dead," the father still grants the son his request.

Think about it; the father knew what kind of a son this was. This wasn't a model son who just all of a sudden went off the deep end and tried to get his father's money. Most parents know if their children are spenders or savers or squanderers. This father was not in denial. He knew what kind of kid his son was. The father probably had a pretty good idea of what the son was going to do with the inheritance. Yet the father *still* gave him his inheritance out of his heart of generosity.

There's another indicator in the story about how generous the father is. After the younger son has squandered all of his wealth and is starving to death, the son is

longing to be one of his father's well-cared-for servants. Remember that the story said there was a famine; and while we don't know if the famine stretches from where the son is to where the father is, it would be hard to think of a large famine not having an effect even miles away, in the entire region. So even though it was a time of scarce resources for the father because of the famine, the father still made sure that his servants were well fed.

The son knows that even if he comes home as a servant, then at least he would be well cared for. So the story makes sure that we know that the father is not cruel or unkind to his servants but treats them generously. And if he's generous with his servants, he's even more so with his sons.

Not only that, in this story of the generous father, we also see that...

3. The father is *patient*.

The passage says that "while the son was still a long way off, the father saw him." The *only* way the father would have seen the son would be if he were *looking* for him – day after day after day. While we don't know how long it takes the son to blow all his money and come to a place where he realizes he has nothing, we know people in our lives we would describe as prodigals, and it can take years, even decades, for them to hit rock bottom. Which means the father was potentially waiting and looking for his son for years.

I have a friend whose son has struggled with addiction to meth since he was a teenager, and he's in his 30's now. He's relapsed countless times. He used to be here in town, and he actually graduated from drug court. We were so proud of him, and hoped he was finally going to be free. Some of you know him. But he relapsed again. Now, if he's not in prison, he's either homeless or he's dead. But his father doesn't even know where his son is. I can't imagine the pain that father is going through, watching the news, watching his emails, watching the horizon – wondering if he'll ever see his son again. It's been years.

And even if it weren't years of waiting for the father in the story, the loss of a son, and the grief it can cause to a good and loving parent, would have *felt* like a lifetime. Still the father kept looking, scanning the horizon for his son. So when the father sees the son finally coming over the horizon, we don't see anger, we see that...

4. The Father is *compassionate*.

Here is another amazing indicator of the depth of the father's compassion for his son. The son most likely expected that when he arrived home, he would receive the death penalty – according to the Old Testament law, that said:

"If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is stubborn and

rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you.” (Deuteronomy 21:18-21, niv)

Think about that – *that’s* what the law said should happen to this son. But the father *ignored* the law – Jesus said the father disobeyed the Old Testament Scripture, because when the father saw his son, he had compassion on him. When the father put the needs of his son above the rules of civic society and even the Old Testament, he made a profound statement about human worth. One scholar writes, “The father’s love for his lost son trumped every other concern. All the rules of fairness, reciprocity, reward, and punishment were set aside. Redeeming love for the lost son prevailed. All the son’s follies of lust, self-destruction, shortsightedness, dissipation, and the rejection of familial love were forgiven.”³

The word “compassion” here is a very strong word, meaning to love and care for someone deeply, to be moved in the inward parts. The father was moved to the very core of his being to act in love toward his son.

This compassion caused the father to *run* toward his son. You’ve got to understand: a typical Jewish father living in that time would *never* exhibit such undignified behavior as running. But the father doesn’t even think about what’s proper; he is compelled by his emotional and compassionate response to the recovery of his son. The story doesn’t tell us how old the father is, but if the son was an adult when he left, and he had been gone for many years, it is very likely that by this time the father is an aged man.

My dad is 84 years old. He used to always wear cowboy boots, but they got to be tough to put on and take off. So he’s got these really cool sneakers that have laces that are kind of like wires, and then instead of sticking out, they go inside the shoe into a mechanism on the heel – a little kind of wheel. They sort of look like “Heelys,” if you had those as a kid. So all my dad has to do is strike his heel on the ground and it automatically tightens his shoelaces! It still takes a while for him to get his shoes on, but those shoes make it easier. I’ve got to get me some of those sneakers.

But we get the idea that the father in this story put his running shoes on *every* day, waiting for the day he saw his son come over the horizon.

The word “run” here is the same word that would be used to describe an athlete in a race. The father is *running*—*not jogging, but running*—with full force and purpose to get to his son. He is so overcome with compassion that he does not wait for the son to get to him; he goes to his son as quickly as he possibly can. You might have thought that he would make his son come to him; he’d let the son prove his remorse. Nope. The father RAN to him. The son likely thought the father was running because of his deep anger; he probably thought the father would make sure the son never set foot on his property, and that when the father got to him he’d beat him senseless. That’s what he deserved. The son had prepared a speech, but instead...

³ Neale, *ibid*, 142

5. The father *forgives lavishly*.

The son knew very well the rules of civil society, of Jewish clan and kin, and of the Old Testament. The son was likely filled with all kinds of shame. Any judgment and punishment that the father would give him would be well deserved. He knew he was no longer a son; his only hope was to be hired like a stranger to be a servant. He was so full of filth and sin he didn't deserve anything.

When I was a youth pastor in Colorado, we had a large section of unused ground on the church property, so we had a "mud bowl." Have you ever seen one? It was awesome. We took an area about 75 feet by about 75 yards and rototilled it like six times, took all the rocks out, and then we had the fire department come and hose it down completely with water from the hydrant. Then we gathered the youth group and we dove in. We played football, we played volleyball, we had relays where you had to crawl and do the crabwalk. We had a contest to see who could get the most completely covered in mud. It was horrible and awesome all at the same time – a bunch of human piles of mud with white eyes and teeth.

When we were done, one of the dads came to pick up his daughter, and the girl ran to him, obviously planning to jump on him and hug him. But before she got to him, dad saw her coming and knew what she was going to do, so quick-thinking, he grabbed a hose and started hosing her down from a long ways away. It's not that the dad didn't love her – it's that he didn't love the mud. He rejected the mud, but not his daughter.

I imagine that the son in this story was really, really ripe. He hadn't been able to afford a shower for a long time. He had started his journey of many, many miles *after* having lived in the horrible filth of a pigsty. But the father didn't grab a hose before the son could get to him. The father didn't say, "It's good to see you son – hit the showers and then we'll talk." The father ran to him, hugged his neck, and kissed his son in all of his filth. The son doesn't even finish his speech before the father is having him clothed like a king, reclaiming him as his son. The father doesn't ask where his son was, where the money is, or how he ended up smelling like pigs; he just welcomes him home.

The Father doesn't once mention the wanderings of the prodigal son. Instead...

6. The father *loves extravagantly* as if it was easy to do so.

The White House receives a lot of mail, as you can imagine; much of which comes from citizens, and many of those are from children. I read a story about one such letter that was sent to the White House by a boy named Mitchell. It said, "Dear Mr. President, I would like you to send children to Mars in the next space rocket going in that direction. I would appreciate it very much if I could go." It was signed, "One of your future voters, Mitchell." That kid new how to get something done in politics! But attached to the note was another note, written by Mitchell's parents. It read: "Dear Mr. President, as the parents of Mitchell Miller, we would like to give you our permission to send Mitchell anywhere into space."

Being a parent can stretch the limits of love even in the best of situations. But unlike those parents, the father in this story lavishes love on his son.

The response to the son coming home is *a party*.

We're told clearly that this party includes food and celebration. Remember, this was during a famine. And even though that famine impacted this family, the father still made sure he celebrated the son with extravagance.

Then we see that the father doesn't allow the older brother to ruin the party. When the brother is jealous, the father invites him back into the party, and he reiterates the love he has for *both* of his children, but he makes it clear that they are celebrating and rejoicing at the younger son being found.

So let me just acknowledge the God-sized elephant in the room, here today:

7. The Father is ***God***.

All that Jesus so painstakingly points out about the father is exactly what God the father is ***to you***. And everything that we read about either son – both separated from their father's love – *they are us*.

But God *erases* the shame of feeling like prodigals. We often focus so much on being lost that we become buried in our shame. We move into feelings of guilt. But God the father removes those feelings from us.

Despite our failings, God is still generous. He generously pours out blessings on us, maybe not material wealth, but he is generous in his gifts to us. Though we often would say to God in our words and actions, "It would be better for me if you were dead," or "I'm going to treat you like you don't exist," God still continues to give us good things. If you are here today and you have not accepted God's love through his Son, Jesus Christ, the very fact that you are breathing air is proof of God's love for you. He's letting you squander his resources that he's given you, even though you've treated him as if he doesn't exist.

But God is patient with us. We fail time and time again, yet God continually watches and waits for us.

God is compassionate. God seeks us out, and while he waits for us to return to him, if you begin taking the steps toward him, he will come running to you with complete self-abandon. ***He runs towards us***.

God forgives. God will disregard the Old Testament laws that say you should die for you sins. He won't even mention the shame you are feeling. He doesn't bring up our past misdeeds but forgives and forgets. He doesn't wait for you to clean up your act; he wraps you in a giant hug and kisses you. Deuteronomy 33:12 says:

"Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders."
(Deuteronomy 33:12, niv)

That means that he holds you in his arms. He *hugs* you.

God loves extravagantly. We are *celebrated* when we come to God. In the previous two stories, Jesus said:

“I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:7, 10, niv)

We do not need to live in the shame of our past, or in jealousy over the grace we see God pour out on the lives of others. We can sit in the promise that we follow a God of deep compassion, love, and forgiveness. We can walk toward God as God *runs toward us* with an embrace of comfort and compassion. We don't need to even finish our speech of sorrow before God begins to wrap us in his arms, for he is a good Father who loves us with complete abandon and is just waiting to see us approach home.

Pastor Roger is coming to prepare to sing, and he's going to sing a beautiful song about the Father – a God who runs to us. And maybe, as he does, you'd like to take some steps toward God, and come to this altar to pray. Come home and meet your father. You won't even make it to the altar – God runs to meet you before you even get here. I don't care if you are the son who left, or like the older brother, you've never physically left – you attend church all the time – but in your heart you have separated yourself from the father by being judgmental, resenting God because he is so loving toward people that you don't think deserve it.

Or, let me just say something to those of us who are fathers: if you don't feel the need to come be reconciled to God, do it for your children, whether they are little ones or adults. They will see God their father the *best* – in you. Are you demonstrating God the Father to them? Come pray that you will be like God for them.

As Pastor Roger sings, please come.

Pray