

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

You Can Come Home Again

Sunday, September 2, 2018

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Luke 15: 11-24

A kindergarten teacher was observing her classroom of children while they drew pictures. Occasionally, she would walk around the room to see each child's work. "What are you drawing?" she asked one little girl who was working diligently at her desk. The girl replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like." The little girl replied, "They will in a minute."

What is God really like? I think we all want to know that. This is a very important question because everyone's faith is based on what they think God is like. Some people behave as if God is a mean judge trying to catch us in the act, and, therefore, their whole life is about running from God or following strict rules all the time. Some people think God is a heavenly accountant who tallies good points and bad points, and at the end of our lives he will punish us or reward us depending upon which points are higher. Some think God is some distant being who made the world and put it in motion, but this God has better things to do than be involved with humanity.

But, what is God really like? Maybe you have been struggling with that question your whole life. Maybe you have never really liked religion and church because you were brought up in a way that presented God as boring, mean, and judgmental. Maybe you have always thought there was a higher power or being that created the world, and you have given a lot of thought about God, but you are just not sure what this God is like. Should you be afraid of God? Should you bother God? What does God want from you?

Maybe you are carrying around a lot of guilt and you really want to know what God thinks of you and what you have done. Maybe you have gone to church occasionally, or maybe you have been in church your whole life, and you've heard mixed messages about what God is like. You wonder if anyone can give you a clear answer.

Back in Jesus' day people had the same burning question. That is why crowds of people gathered to hear Jesus speak and ask him questions. Jesus said and did some profound things in order to show us what God is like. One of the most profound things he did was tell the parable of the prodigal son.

The Bible does not get any better than in Luke 15, where we read the parable of lost sheep, lost coin, and the lost or prodigal son. In many ways, the parable of the prodigal son is one of the greatest stories ever told, not just in the Bible, but in the history of literature. Movies, songs, poems, books, and novels throughout the ages have been based on this powerful story. And the parable is only 20 verses long! People who don't consider themselves religious know and love this parable. Over and over again, folks from all walks of life have been drawn to this parable.

Why do people love it so much? Why are so many drawn to it? Why is it so intriguing? Because it answers the burning question we all have. It tells us what God is like.

I want us to take a closer look at this parable today because if you have wondered what God is like, this parable is for you. If you are ever in doubt about what God is like, look no further than this parable. Let's jump right in. Jesus asks, "So, you want to know what God is like? Let me tell you a story:"

¹¹ Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

The father in the story is God. Be sure you watch the father in the parable. The father had two sons. The younger one said, "I know it all. Life would be so much more fun if I could get out of dodge, leave this life and do what I want. 'Dad, give me my inheritance early. I want to be on my own.'" The father gave him the money, and he left his father, left his home, ran off, and did what he wanted to do.

The young son thought life would be better without his father. He wanted the blessings and gifts of the father without a relationship with the father.

Have you ever been in a situation in your life where people cared more about what you could give,

what you could offer, than about you or having a relationship with you? Maybe it was a friend or co-worker. How did it make you feel? All they wanted was money or some connection you had with another person or some resource you could offer, but they really didn't care about you. They never wanted to spend time with you. It was all about what you could do for them. You felt used and unappreciated.

You know what I think? I think that God feels the same way when we take his gifts and blessings and enjoy the life He has given us without appreciating Him and developing a relationship with Him. I think that is one of things Jesus is trying to tell us in this parable. God wants a relationship with us. God wants to be in our lives. He wants to love on us, guide us, connect with us, give us a purpose, listen to us, and He wants us to listen to him. But here is the thing – God will not force a relationship on us. He gives us freedom to choose.

Notice the father in the parable. He didn't stop his son from taking the money and running. As painful as it was for the father not to stop him, he let him go because love and a relationship is never forced.

So, the young son goes off to Las Vegas and has a good ole time! "I'm free! I'm free! I can do what I want. I have all this money. There is no limit to what I can do. I have no one telling me that I can't do this and I can't do that... Let's party!" Let's read what happens next:

¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

The party was over. The son hit rock bottom. He ran out of money and found himself working with pigs, craving the food they ate. Remember, he was Jewish. Pigs were considered unclean to him, yet he was living and working in pig slop. That was about as low as he could get! Life without his father was not as exciting as he thought it was going to be. Sitting in pig slop, feeling tired, cold, and hungry, the reality of being away from his father did not match the picture in his mind.

Sin always looks better before we do it than after we do it, doesn't it? Running away from God always seems more exciting than it really is. Life without God never delivers what it promises.

I remember when I was about 8 or 9, I ran away from home. I thought it would be so nice to be on my

own – no one telling me what to do, when to go to bed, and what to eat. So, I packed a back pack with toys, a sandwich, and some snacks. I threw a folder in the pack that had paper for me to draw on. I ran down to a creek, sat on a rock, and ate my sandwich. It felt great! Then I pulled out my folder filled with drawing paper and a picture of my parents fell out. I had used it for a project at school. I remember looking at the picture and thinking about how much I loved my parents. Suddenly, I became terrified of what it would be like without them. I quickly packed up my things and ran home! I ran into the kitchen and hugged my mom. I looked at the clock, and I had not been gone more than 30 minutes! They didn't even miss me!

Sooner or later in life, all of us come to the place where we realize we need more than the blessings of the Father – we need the Father himself. We need more than life – we need the Creator of life. We need more than money and things – we need love and relationship. Those in AA call it a moment of clarity. Some call it a conversion experience. More traditional folks call it being born again. But, it is all the same experience – it is getting to the place in your life when success doesn't satisfy anymore, power doesn't satisfy anymore, money and things don't satisfy anymore, constant adventures of play and travel don't satisfy anymore, and you feel a hunger deep in your soul for the only thing that will satisfy – the unconditional love and companionship of the Father! Jesus put it this way in the context of the parable: "He came to himself." The younger son came to the realization that his life was empty without his father.

Some of you are in that place today. You realize how empty your life has become without God in it. You have been chasing one empty promise after the other, thinking it will be enough, but it always leaves you cold. There is not enough sexual pleasure, money, power, prestige, awards, accolades, that can satisfy or that can do what a relationship with the heavenly Father can do in your life.

The younger son came to this realization. Let's read what he did next:

¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

This is how desperate the young son had become! This is how empty he was. He wanted to go

home and be a paid servant for his father instead of remaining where he was on his own. He wasn't expecting to be loved and accepted back into the family. He wasn't expecting to be called a son. In fact, in Jesus' day, a son who did what the younger son did would have been disowned by his father, cut off from the family. But he was so empty, so miserable, so desperate for his father that he just wanted to be considered a hired hand for his father. That's it.

I know so many people who delay coming back to God because they think just like the younger son. They think they have wandered away so far, screwed up so badly, that the best they can hope for is to be a slave to God. They think that if they come back to God they will have to fulfill some ridiculous religious duty and that God will punish them and remind them of what they did, keeping tabs on them so that maybe they will get into heaven. Perhaps that is where some of you are today. You think if you come back home to God you are going to feel worse about what you have done and where you have been. You think God will never let you forget what you did.

Is that what you think God is like? Think again. Let's allow Jesus to tell us what God is like:

²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Did you see what the father did? It says when his son was far off, he saw him! This means the father had been looking for him! Everyday, the father had looked anxiously down the driveway hoping his son would return. Everyday, the father had looked outside the kitchen window waiting for his son – waiting and hoping.

And then, the text says that when the father finally saw his son, he ran after him! Fathers in Jesus' day didn't run for anything. It was considered undignified and shameful. Yet, Jesus said that the father ran after him! When he got to his son, he didn't lecture him. He threw his arms around his son and kissed him.

The son then began his apology speech, but notice what happens when he starts apologizing:

²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe — the best one — and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine

was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Did you see that? As the son was apologizing, his father interrupted him - "Forget all that. Call the DJ! Call the caterer! Call our neighbors and friends! We are going to have a party! We are going to celebrate!" My son is home!

What is God like? **God is your loving creator who relentlessly loves you and will never stop loving you. Our God is a God of love who always welcomes you home.** This is what Jesus taught and, more importantly, what he embodied.

Here is Jesus' invitation for each of us today:

"If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens, come to me, and I will give you rest." - Matthew 11:28 (CEV)

Commenting on this verse, Rick Warren writes, "I like that verse because it says the exact opposite of what most people think God will say to them. They think that if God wants them to come home, he's going to say, 'Come home to me, and I will give you rules. Come home to me, and I will give you regulations. Come home to me, and I will give you restrictions. Come home to me, and I will give you religion. Come home to me, and I will give you rituals.' But God doesn't say any of those things. He says, 'Come home to me, and I will give you rest.'"

Regardless of what you've heard, Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship. It is not something that confines you; it is something that sets you free. It is not something that shames you; it is something that empowers you.

I don't know what you think of God. I don't know what kind of religious upbringing you had. But one thing I do know is that God loves you, and God doesn't want to put any more burdens on you. In fact, God wants to take them away and give you love, hope, peace, and joy. This parable proves it. It came from the lips of Jesus.

Perhaps you are thinking, "But Charley, you don't know what I have done. You don't know how dark I feel. You don't know how lost I am." Well let me tell you a true story:

Riley Short is one of my mentors. I was his associate pastor for 4 years when I served in Lakeland, Florida. He loves to tell the story of the time he was a young pastor with young kids. It had been a tough week at the church. He was late getting to his sermon and was toiling in his study at home on a Saturday afternoon.

One of his young daughters barged into his study and said, “Daddy, Daddy, look at the picture I drew!” Riley got angry and said, “What do you think you are doing? I’ve told you a hundred times to always knock before you come in! Daddy is working on a sermon and can’t talk to you right now. Get out of here and go play.” She left in tears with the picture in her hands.

Riley went back to his desk and tried to finish his sermon, but inspiration would not come. He was stuck. Then he sensed God say to him, “You think you are so important, working on a sermon. People won’t remember that sermon five minutes after you preach it. But you just broke your little girl’s heart. You need to do something about it.”

So Riley opened his study door and called his daughter to come in. She came in sheepishly, still holding her picture. Riley said, “Sweetheart, I am not mad at you. I want to tell you something. Come sit on my lap. I am so sorry I got angry at you. I love you with all my heart. You are more important than a sermon. Can you forgive me?” “Of course Daddy” she replied. Then Riley said, “Now, show me the picture you drew.” She said, “I drew our house. See, there is grass. There are the windows, and here is our dog sitting on the porch.” “Oh, I love it!” Riley said.

Riley then looked at his daughter and said, “Sweetheart, Daddy is working on his sermon and is stuck. I need your help. I am talking about Jesus tomorrow. If you could tell the world anything about Jesus, what would you say?” She thought for a moment and said, “I would say...if you are ever lost, Jesus will find you.”

You see, you are never really lost. The Good Shepherd knows where you are and is always ready to reach out to you and pick you up, shower you with love and grace, and make you new again. So come home. It’s time to come home.



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