

Charley:

Welcome to Worship here at Johns Creek United Methodist Church. We are so glad that you've joined us for remote worship, whether you're by yourself or with loved ones, whether it's the morning, evening, or afternoon, we're we're glad that you're connecting with us in this way, and we hope this is a meaningful time for you.

Before I go into my prayer, I'd like to say a quick word about Ash Wednesday. It is upon us, if you can believe it or not. In fact, this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, and we have a couple of offerings for you. First of all, as always, we'll have a remote worship service for you to connect with, and that'll be offered on Ash Wednesday itself, and we will present that to you on Facebook and through our various communications. But if you're someone who'd like to receive ashes in person, we're also offering kind of a come and go ashing at noon and at 7:00 PM on Ash Wednesday, under the portico, right next to the church office. So if you're someone who'd like to receive ashes, we encourage you to be a part of that. We simply ask that you wear a mask as you are receiving you're ashes. We appreciate it.

Let's be in an attitude of prayer together. Lord, we do thank you for this time of worship. We're grateful to be able to connect with you in this way. And Lord, I pray for those who are joining me in this time of worship, who are going through various journeys and are seeking a word from you. And Lord, you've given me the amazing privilege and responsibility of preaching that very word. So Lord, I ask you to speak to me and through me in such a way that all of us receive a word from you that will make a difference to our lives. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Who is God? What is God really like? Ever wondered that? It's an important question, because our faith is determined by how we answer that very question. Many people see God as an angry judge who's watching our every move and following us everywhere we go. And so many people who see God this way feel He's very judgmental. And so most of their faith is about following strict rules or maybe running from God. Of course, some people see God as some distant God who kind of wound up this world, but wants nothing to do with humanity. He has better things to do.

And maybe you've struggled with that question before in your life. You've wondered, "What is God really like? When it comes down to it, who is God?" And maybe you do see God as that angry judge, and you wonder, "Should I be scared of God? Should I even bother with God?" Or maybe you're someone who's grown up in the church your whole life, but you've received mixed messages about who God is and what God wants from you. And you're wondering, "Should I even bother with God?" Or maybe you're someone who's racked with great guilt in your life. It's a heavy burden that you face. And you've often asked the question, "What does God think of me? And what does God think of what I've done in my life? And should I really be afraid of this God? Should I really follow this God?"

Back in Jesus' day, many people asked the same burning question. In fact, that's why many people gathered around Jesus as He taught and as He preached and as He performed miracles, because Jesus was trying to show people what God is like. That's why He was so popular. That was His purpose. In fact, Jesus did a very, very profound thing when it comes to demonstrating who God is and describing who God is. He told the parable of the prodigal son.

Now the Bible doesn't get much better than Luke 15, where we find the Parable of the Lost Coin, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Lost Son. It's an incredible parable. In fact, it's an incredible piece of literature. Many people think it's a wonderful, wonderful story that's not even great in the Bible, but just one of the greatest stories in the history of literature. Movies and books and poems have been based upon this incredible story. And it's only 20 verses long. If you can believe that. Scores of people from all walks of life have been drawn to this story throughout history.

And so the question is why? Why are we drawn to it so much? Why do people love it so much? Why do even non-religious people quote it and refer to it and are inspired by it? Because it answers for us that burning question, what is God like? So if you've ever wondered, if you've ever asked that question and want an answer, I encourage you to pay attention to the message today.

Because I want to take a closer look at this powerful parable. Again, it appears in Luke 15, and it begins this way. So what is God like? Here we go. Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 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. A few days later, the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property and dissolute living."

Now, I want you to pay attention to something here. Ask yourself, what is the father doing? Because in this parable, the Father represents God. So ask the question, what is the Father doing? I had a great Bible professor in seminary say to me one day, "Charlie, the most important question you can ever ask when you look at a biblical text is, what is God doing in this very text?" So Jesus said, "A man had two sons and the younger one said, 'You know what? I have all the answers. I want to do my own thing. I know it all. So Dad, give me my inheritance early. I know what I got coming to me. I want to live my own life. I want to make my own decisions. I want to do my own thing.'"

You see, the young son thought that life would be better without the father. He wanted the blessings of the father without having a relationship with the father. Have you ever been in a situation in your life where you felt used and exploited? Ever come across a person where you knew deep inside they really didn't care about you, all they cared about was what you could provide for them? Maybe it was a coworker, maybe it was a so-called friend. And even though they were very, very slick, you knew all they wanted was what you could give them, and they really could care less about you and your life and your wellbeing.

I imagine that's how God feels when we seek His blessings, but do not seek Him. That's exactly what the young son was doing. He wanted the blessings of the father without having the father. And I think this is one of the points that Jesus was trying to make in this parable. Jesus wants to be in our lives. God wants to be in our lives. He not only wants to give us blessings, of course, but He wants to guide our lives. He wants to love us. He wants to embrace us. He wants a relationship with us.

But here's the great thing about God, He has given us free will. He has given us the freedom to choose. And so you noticed in the parable, the Father... He doesn't stop him as much as it was painful to see his son go, to see his son leave the father let him go, because there is no such thing as forced love. So the young man, he goes off to Las Vegas and has a great old time. Spends all the money, spends his inheritance, enjoys his life, and then watch what happens next.

Verse 14, "When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to the fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything." So what happened? The party was over. He spent all of his money. He had hit rock bottom. In fact, he hit bottom so hard, he found himself in pig slop, literally.

And this character was Jewish and to Jewish people, pigs were very unclean. That's how bottom, that's how low he had gotten. He was with the pigs. You see, the interesting thing is the picture in his mind of what life would be like without the father didn't fit reality. Life without the father wasn't as great as he thought it would be.

I remember when I was about eight or nine years old growing up in Dunwoody, I decided one day, and I don't know how I made this decision, but I decided one day that I was just going to run away from home. I thought I knew a lot, and it would be nice to be away and not be told when I had to go to bed

and what I had to do and what I had to eat. So I got a backpack and I filled it with a bunch of great snacks, sweet things, and I put a sandwich in there. I put some toys in there. And I threw a folder in there with a bunch of paper I could draw on, and I ran away from home, about a quarter mile from the house.

I went down to this creek that I used to play in and I leaned back on this rock and I enjoyed my sandwich. And I said, "Yes, I've run away." And after I finished my sandwich, I took out that folder with all the paper in it. I was going to draw. And out fell a picture of my parents, and I had used it for a project earlier in school. And I remember looking at that picture and looking at my parents and thinking at that very moment how much I loved my parents. And then I became terrified. I don't want to live life without my parents. I can't do this. And so I packed up all my stuff and I ran home and I opened the kitchen door and there was my mom. And I hugged her and I looked at the clock, and I hadn't been gone 20 minutes. I haven't even been missed.

Sooner or later in life, I think we all come to the place where we realize we need more than the blessings of the Father, we need the Father himself. That we need more than life, we need the creator of life. We need more than money and possessions. We need need love, unconditional love and relationship. Those in AA call it a moment of clarity. Others call it a conversion experience. Some call it being born again, but whatever you want to call it, the experience is pretty much the same.

It's getting to the place in your life where success doesn't cut it anymore, where power doesn't cut it anymore, where escapades don't cut it anymore, where adventures simply don't cut it anymore, and you feel empty. Nothing satisfies, and deep in your soul you long for a love that you've been created for, you long for a spiritual relationship you know you've been created for. And Jesus in the parable puts it very, very succinctly when it came to the point where the younger son came to this realization. Jesus said, "He came to himself." And I know some of you are in that place today.

You're in an empty place, where you're realizing that the promises of the world really don't satisfy. And you realize there is not enough money, there are not enough cars, there are not enough sexual pleasures, there is not enough power, there is not enough success that will satisfy you, that will fill that void in your life. Maybe you've come to yourself and you realize that you don't want to do life anymore without a relationship with God.

The younger son came to this realization. Let's look what happens next in this wonderful story. Verse 17, "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bred enough and despair? And here I am dying of hunger. I will get up and I will go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, 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 was. This is how empty he was. He was willing simply to be a hired hand. He didn't even need to be called son by his father.

In fact, back in those days, if a son did to a father what this son did, they would be disowned from the family. And so the son comes crawling back, and he says, "I'll just be one of your hired hands. I'll just work with the servants. I just want to be that close to you. That's all I want." He was so empty, so miserable that he was willing to put up with that.

I know many people who delay coming back to God because they feel like this younger son. They try to hide from God or they run from God, or again, they delay from coming back to God because they think once they come back to God, God is going to punish them for eternity. God's going to make them feel even worse about what they've done, that God's just going to make them a hired servant. And maybe you think that today. Maybe deep within that you're longing to be connected with God again. You're longing for that relationship, but you're scared. What's God going to think of me? What's God going to do to me? What's the church going to do to me?

Is that what you think God is really like? Think again. Let's allow Jesus to tell us what God is like. "So he set off the younger son and went to his father. And listen to this, but while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. And he ran and he 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," that means, that implies that the father had been looking every day for his son. Every day he would look down that driveway, hoping and praying his son would return. And when he did the father, it says, "Ran to him."

Now, back in those days, it was considered undignified and shameful for a father to run, for a grown man to run. Yet, he did it. He loved his son so much that he ran to him and put his arms around him and kissed him. And the son immediately began to apologize. And listen what happens, and notice what happens when he begins to apologize. "Then the son said to him, 'Father, I'm sorry I've sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But," it says, "the Father interrupted him and 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, and get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost, and now he's found.' And they began to celebrate."

Did you see how the father reacted? Notice what the father is doing in this story. Did you see how he responded to his younger son when he returned? He said, "Call the DJ. Call the Ritz Carlton. Get the caterer. Get the band. We're going to have a party, for my son is home."

What is God like? What is God like? God is your loving creator who is relentlessly in love with you and will never ever stop loving you. And that means you are always welcome back to God. That's who God is. Now, I don't know what you think of God. I don't know your upbringing when it comes to religion and faith, but I do know this, if there's one thing I do know, you are God's child and God loves you. And the last thing God wants to do is put more burdens on you. In fact, God wants to give you love and joy and peace in your life.

This parable proves it because it comes from the very lips of Jesus Christ. But perhaps you're thinking, "Well, Charlie, I hear that, but you don't know what I've done. You don't know how lost I feel. You don't know how dark my life has become. I don't know if I can be saved. I don't know if I can turn back. I don't know if I can be found." If that's how you feel. Let me tell you a true story.

Riley Short was a mentor of mine, still is. I was his associate for four years in Lakeland. Just a very wise man and preacher. And there's a story that he would often tell that I'll never forget as long as I live. About a time he was preparing a sermon in his study, and this is when he was a young father, and it had been a very hectic week, as weeks often get as a pastor, many needs that week. I think he had a funeral and all kinds of different challenges and obstacles.

And so he was late preparing a sermon. And so he was in his study trying desperately to finish it on a Saturday. His study door was shut. He wanted it to be quiet, not to be disturbed. When all of a sudden one of his young daughters just barged into his study, opened the door, and said, "Daddy, daddy, daddy, how you doing? I'm drawing a picture for you." And Riley, he had had enough. It was a tough week, and he had a short fuse that day. And he said, 'Sweetheart, what do you think you're doing? Daddy's trying to work on a sermon. I told you that before. Please just leave. I'll look at the picture later. Close the door on your way out."

And so she did, with her face sunk. Riley tried to get back to his sermon and he couldn't get inspired. And he said he felt the spirit of God say to him in that moment, "You think you're hot stuff, don't you? Working on a sermon. Riley, most of those people won't remember that sermon five minutes after you preach it. But that little girl of yours loves you so much and you've hurt her feelings." Well, Riley, who

was convicted, he said he got up from his chair in the study from his desk, and he went outside the study to find his daughter. And there she was still on the floor just drawing pictures.

And she looked up and he said, "Sweetheart, would you come inside? Daddy's not mad at you anymore. Would you come inside?" And she did. And he said, "Sweetheart, sit on my lap." He said, "Sweetie, I'm so sorry. You are way more important than a sermon. Can you forgive daddy?" And she said, "Well, sure." And he said, "Well, what did you want to show me?" And she said, "Oh, I just was drawing this picture of our house and our dog. And isn't this nice daddy?" And he said, "Oh yeah, that's great."

And then he looked at her and said, "And sweetheart, tomorrow daddy's got a preacher sermon, like I often do, and I'm talking about Jesus tomorrow. And so can you tell me, if you were to tell the world anything about Jesus, what would you say?" And she thought for a moment, and she looked at her daddy and said, "I would say that if you're ever lost, Jesus will find you."

You see, you're never truly lost. It doesn't matter what you've done or how lost you may feel, or how dark your life has become, the Lord Jesus, our Lord, knows exactly where you are. You're never gone from His sight. And He is ready when you are to embrace you and to love you, and to renew you and show you the way home. It's time to come home. It's time to come home. Let's pray.

Lord, remind us through this powerful parable of your amazing love for us, that we never stray so far that you cannot find us and you cannot embrace us and bring us back. And Lord, I pray for those who feel lost, who feel like they are too far away. And I pray that they would feel your presence and your reach and your embrace, and your love would bring them back home again and make them whole. It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.