

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found. (Luke 15:32 N.R.S.V.)

The Loving Father

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

This parable about the prodigal son is one of best known of Jesus' parables. My question for you this morning is to think for a moment about which character in this parable you most identify with.

Are you most like the wayward son who insulted his father, demanded his inheritance early, left home and wasted his money in wild living, until he was reduced to begging. Are you like the son who came back home expecting to be rejected, but who instead was welcomed with open and loving arms?

Or are you most like the older brother, the good one, the one who stood by his father all these years and never did anything wrong. The one who is upset that the wasteful son is being welcomed back, who can't help but think that this easy forgiveness makes a mockery of justice and accountability?

Most Christians will identify with one or the other of the two brothers. But this morning, I ask you to identify with the father. Yes, the father represents God in this parable. And we find it hard to identify with God. Yet our calling as Christians is to model our behavior after the character of God. Just as the father in this story is loving and forgiving, we need to be loving and forgiving. That is a tall order.

Many preachers point out that the smug self righteousness of the elder brother is itself sinful. They point out that none of us is perfect and that we had better be careful about how much we demand justice and mandatory sentencing, because when it is our turn to stand before the judge, we are all going to be hoping for mercy.

Yet the key to this passage is to understand how God sees our brothers and sisters. This story gives us insight into the heart of God.

Several years ago just after the Vietnam War ended, the president was being urged to issue a pardon to the young men who had escaped the draft by going to Canada. These "draft dodgers" as they were called, now wanted to come home. But unless the president pardoned them, they would all face

prison terms if they came back into the country. One man called a well-known talk show host and asked what the host thought about this outlandish plan to pardon the draft dodgers.

The talk show host replied in words to this effect: Well, that depends on whether we are talking about your son or my son. If we are talking about your son, who has flouted authority, fled like a coward from his moral duty, and now that the danger is over, is whining about being allowed to come home. Well, sir, I think he ought to be shot.

But if you are talking about my son, who got scared and made a terrible mistake and ran away to Canada. If you are talking about my son, who now realizes his mistake and just wants to come home again. Well, then sir, I would sure appreciate it if the president could find it in his heart to let my boy come home.

So many times when we are on our soap box about the need for justice, we are condemning faceless strangers, or at the very least people we don't know very well. The challenge is to develop the heart of a good parent toward all others. That is a tall order.

Now I don't mean to suggest that this means we are always push overs. It means that we act in genuine love. I had some parents tell me once about what they had gone through with their son. When he was in his twenties, he called his parents from a distant city and begged them to come get him. They knew he had been abusing drugs. But he insisted that he was ready to change and just needed a little help.

So they drove through the night to get there. They picked up their dirty, ragged son and brought him home. They told him that he could stay there as long as he stayed in a drug rehab program and stayed away from illegal drugs. Things went well for a couple of weeks and then the son started doing drugs again. The parents promptly loaded their son back into the car and drove him back to where they had picked him up. They let him out and told him to call them when he was really serious. Then they drove away.

The mother said, that was the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. It tore her heart in two. They drove away not knowing if they would ever see their son alive again.

Fortunately that story has a good ending. Their son was eventually able to get back into rehab and turn his life around. And the family was reunited. The mother was telling me this with a tear in her eye, but also with a smile on her face. I could tell how very proud she was of her son. I can imagine her saying to the rest of the family. "We have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The challenge of this passage to us Christians is to develop a heart like God's heart. The challenge is for us to learn how to give guidance and encouragement, and proper rules, and when to throw the rule book out the window and just hold on in love.

Chonda Pierce in her book, "It's Always Darkest Before the Fun Comes Up" (page 80-84) tells the story of a young woman named December. December's father was a pastor. And December got the

message very early on that the pastor's children were supposed to be perfect. December knew that she would never be good enough for the people of the church, so she started to rebel. In her teenage years she ran away from home and lived on the streets. She spent her nights partying and she slept with any man who caught her eye. Sometimes she would slip into her parent's evening church services, but she always left before anyone could talk to her.

After she became pregnant, December decided to return to her parents. She expected shame and condemnation. Instead, December's parents welcomed her back with open arms. As she says, "The bottom line is that I came back to my family and God because they love me with no strings attached. They forgave me. . . I thought I could do something to make them disown me, but I was wrong."

God has the ultimate good parent's heart, that is how he regards us. Today we are going to celebrate the baptism of baby Brooks. We will declare that God has claimed Brooks as his own child. That is a very special promise. It means that no matter where Brooks goes in life, even if he turns away from God for awhile, God will always be waiting to welcome him back. And this congregation will make a promise also. We will promise to nurture Brooks in his love for God, and to embody God's welcome for him.

This isn't something we can do on our own. We can't develop a heart like God's by just working extra hard. But we can do it with God's help. For with God all things are possible.

Amen.