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Forgiving Father – Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Gospel scripture is often called the story of "The Prodigal Son." But the word "prodigal" means "to be wasteful, or recklessly extravagant." The scripture, however, is not about being wasteful; it's about repentance and forgiveness, and a story of "The Forgiving Father."

When we hear this passage, we usually picture the son who disobeyed his father through a sinful live style. When you hear this story, many people tend to get confused on the main character.

It's not the swine; It's not the party guest; It's not even the prodigal son...The main character of this story is the FATHER. The Bible says that while the prodigal son was a great ways off, his father saw him...a Loving Father offering Forgiveness.

But as Americans living more than 20 centuries after Luke wrote this Gospel, we overlook a few things that would have been readily apparent to the average listener in 1st-century Israel. Life was different then, although much of that culture still remains in the Middle East today.

The behavior that Jesus mentions would have been shocking to his listeners. Not the son's rude behavior so much. Rather, it's the father's behavior that would have shocked them. For a son to ask for his inheritance from his father who is still alive is the same as saying "You're worthless to me as a father!

Why don't you just die and give me my money now? That way I don't have to pretend to mourn at your funeral." Not the kind of sentiment we're likely to see on any Hallmark Father's Day cards anytime soon.

Dishonoring the family is a serious thing. In many cultures — including the one Jesus was addressing — disrespect at that level was punishable by death at the hands of the father. Leviticus 20:9 states: "If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death. He has cursed his father or his mother, and his blood will be on his own head."

By verse 15, Jesus' Jewish listeners were no doubt ready for the story to end. In fact, there's a 2nd-century Jewish story that ends similarly: the

son gets what he deserves — he is reduced to the low, horrible level of feeding the most unclean animals in Jewish culture. At this point the son is cut off from the Jewish community and from any financial charity it would have otherwise offered him.

In that culture, fathers are revered and adult men of any social standing walk with regal stature – they don't run. Children and servants may run, but not an adult male, and not a father who has children to run for him. Thus, a returning son would be brought to the father, not the other way around.

And in no instance would a grown Middle Eastern man take off running with his arms out to greet someone — especially a son who had shamed him and his family as disgracefully and publicly as this one had. In order to run, the father would have to lift his garment up above his knees.

Picture a grown man trying to do that while reaching out with his arms at the same time. Few things look less dignified than that. Yet that's what the father in this parable did. When he reached his son, he grabbed him in a big bear hug and called for the best robe, a ring, and sandals for his returned son.

The best robe in the house would have belonged to the father himself, and the ring would have been the family signet ring — a symbol of the young man's reinstatement to sonship in a wealthy household, even after spending a third of what the father had spent his entire life earning.

Slaves did not wear sandals; they went barefoot. So, the father is saying that he will take him back, not as a servant, but only as a son. This is the type of father we want God to be. Someone who doesn't care what anyone else thinks and will come running to welcome us home.

And the lost son reminds us of ourselves so much. Verse 17 reminds us that it wasn't the badness of his life that made the young man realize his error; it was the goodness of his father.

I was quite young when I got married and it was honeymoon night that I realized I had made the biggest mistake of my life. That night while my husband was sleeping, I snuck out of the bed, quietly got dressed and ran to the telephone booth, there were telephone booths at that time, and I called my father crying asking him to please let me come home.

I really thought he would feel sorry for me and come and get me, instead he said, "you made your bed hard, now you have to lie in it. And for six years I laid in that bed abused until my father relented and said, "okay, you have been tortured enough, it is time to come home."

That's the kind of father that I was looking for and finally got. Whatever our own particular sins may be, we relate to, we long for, we even expect, a loving God who'll throw his arms out wide and come running to greet us. Our awesome loving God would do no less, and Jesus confirms it for us in the parable.

Jesus died for all of us, every one of us, so that we wouldn't have to. Anyone who accepts that gift from God is saved. In 2 Cor. 5:17, Paul mentions that everyone who is in Christ is a new creation. Whatever they were before has been changed.

Whether we approve of them or not, in Jesus' eyes, each of us is worth dying for. So how can we think of someone else as being worthless? If we saw the Christ in each of us, we'd treat each other differently.

A young lady named Sally had an experience in a seminary class, given by her professor who was known for his elaborate object lessons. One particular day, Sally walked into the class and saw a big target on the wall.

On a table nearby was a bunch of darts. The professor told the students to draw a picture of someone that they disliked, or someone who had made them angry, and he would allow them to throw darts at the person's picture.

Sally's friend drew a picture of someone who had stolen her boyfriend. Another friend drew a picture of his little brother. Sally drew a picture of a former friend, putting a lot of detail into her drawing, even drawing pimples on the face. Sally was pleased with the overall effect she had achieved.

The class lined up and began throwing darts. Some of the students threw their darts with such force that their targets were ripping apart. Sally looked forward to her turn, and was disappointed when the professor, because of time limits, asked the students to return to their seats.

As Sally sat thinking about how angry she was because she didn't have a chance to throw any darts at her target. The professor began removing the target from the wall. Underneath the target was a picture of Jesus. A hush fell over the room as each student viewed the mangled picture of Jesus; holes and jagged marks covered His face and His eyes were pierced.

The professor said only these words...And the King will tell them, 'I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!' — Matthew 25:40

No other words were necessary; the tear-filled eyes of the students focused only on the picture of Christ. So how do we feel about "the least of these"? Do we welcome sinners into the body of Christ, or do we storm out

of God's kingdom in a huff because we think he's offering salvation to the wrong kinds of sinners?

There's another son, however. The one we ignore. The one we think of as trying to prevent the father from welcoming us back. Jesus doesn't say whether that son comes back in to the party or not.

And this had to be a huge party. A calf would be enough to feed the entire village! The father explains that the celebration is for all of them to partake in – as the lost son was also a lost brother. Remember that the brother refers to him as “this son of yours,” and not “this brother of mine.”

Does that stubborn brother see the father's point and join them inside, or does he keep his miserable attitude and stay outside? We presume that the father went back in, but we can't be sure about that brother. His own pride and stubbornness have pushed him from the father's banquet.

As difficult as it is to realize that we are all both the younger son and the older brother, we have a third calling: to be the father.

Henri Nouwen was a Roman Catholic priest who was deeply intrigued by Rembrandt's painting, “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” So much so that he wrote a book about the spiritual implications of that parable, based on the perspective he gained from looking at that painting for days during a visit to St. Petersburg in Russia.

He writes, “As the returned child of God, living in the Father's house, God's joy is mine to claim. ... But there is more. A child does not remain a child. ... A child becomes an adult. ... When the prodigal son returns home, he returns not to remain a child, but to claim his sonship and become a father himself.”

Jesus himself, when asked by his disciples how they should pray, included the command that we ask the father to forgive us just as we forgive others. When we can honestly wish someone well who has hurt us, we are maturing and growing through the level of the older brother and becoming like the father.

It is interesting that the father describes his lost son's condition as having been lost but now found, dead but now alive. There's a parallel between the prodigal son coming to the father and our coming to the father and that is through faith in Jesus Christ.

If we truly accept Christ's message to us in today's parable, we'll understand that it's not all about us. It's about the glory of God and his kingdom, and our obligation, if we truly repent, to grow in his love so we can

help bring his kingdom to others — even to those we don't think deserve it. That's what makes it grace. We are blessed with a forgiving Father. Amen.

Let us pray: We give you all thanks and praise, O God, for you are always seeking the lost and rescuing the enslaved. At the first sign of repentance, you run to us with your arms open and your heart full of compassion. We offer you thanks and praise at all times through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.