

The Prodigal Father

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 27, 2022
based on Luke 15:11b-32*

The notable theologian, Karl Barth, argued for universal salvation on the basis of one verse from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. "In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world unto [God]self." "Period," said Barth. He went on to say that it doesn't say, "In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the *Western* world unto [God]self." No, just the world – the whole world..

The essential Christian message is that God sent Jesus to this world to announce that it is God's will that no one ever be lost -- that no one should be considered beyond reclaiming, no matter their horrible choices in this life – even Vladimir Putin.

Well, of course, there are some who would, in answer to that, say "What is the point of being a Christian then, if it is not to avoid damnation? If it's not to get our exclusive reservations in to heaven." Some people, God bless them, want to be found destined for a very posh heaven with only a few select like-minded chosen. Where is the joy in "salvation" for them if there isn't a boiling hot, snake filled, fiery pit of hell waiting for other people?

And, yes, if there is no such place, what are we doing here, then? Why aren't we all out carousing on this lovely spring morning?

The apostle Paul asked that very question. To those who would say, "Maybe we ought to use every moment to indulge ourselves," Paul argued that we ought to live upright lives because an upright life is the only decent way to live.

Christians for Paul and Jesus are those people who know what a gift this little life of ours is – what a joy it is to love someone; to have children and grandchildren and invest ourselves in them in a way that once we are gone they will always remember us fondly and preserve our memory.

Living a good life merely to avoid damnation, then, is the silliest idea on earth. We live good lives because those are the only lives that offer lasting happiness and deep inner peace.

As the prophet Micah once said,

*God has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)*

It's like that is written on our very souls.

Eight hundred years ago the Italian poet, Dante, posited that hell was not really a place of punishment. Instead, he argued that it was a place God, in God's infinite love, offered to those who, for whatever reason, don't want to walk humbly and eternally with God. Dante argued that "hell" was *not* a place where God slaps people with the right hand of God's wrath but, rather, offers them the left hand of God's love.

This morning we heard a classic story of a boy who asked for his father's inheritance, then went off into a distant country, putting as much space between him and his father as possible. Then in that far off land, the boy lived as he pleased, and in no time at all descended to an animal state, existing on slop he was feeding swine because that's the only job a foreign-born worker like himself could find there.

Elizabeth Bishop, in her poem, *A Prodigal*, draws a stark portrait of the boy while he is at work ...

*The floor was rotten; the sty
was plastered halfway up with glass-smooth dung.
the pigs' eyes followed him, a cheerful stare--
even to the sow that always ate her young--*

*But sometimes mornings after drinking bouts
the sunrise glazed the barnyard mud with red,
the burning puddles seemed to reassure.
And then he thought he might endure
his exile yet another year or more.*

*The farmer whom he worked for came at dark
to shut the cows and horses in the barn.
The pigs stuck out their little feet and snored.*

*Carrying a bucket along a slimy board,
it took him a long time
finally to make up his mind to go home.*

Well, the prodigal eventually has a great psychological insight. While he is feeding the refuse from the farmer's kitchen to the pigs it says, "He came to himself."

I am NOT a pig" he must have said internally

Hear this marvelous word of encouragement from Fr. Richard Rohr for just such people:

When you can trust that there is a part of you that has always said "Yes" to God, that you can trust your soul, even if you've gone down a lot of dead ends. Even those dead ends will be turned around. That's the providence of God. Trust that even your dead ends, your mistakes, your sins were still misguided attempts to find love.

Don't hate yourself, just be honest with yourself! Even your sexual forays, your drug problems, your alcoholism -- they were all misguided attempts to find the Great Love.

Your heart of hearts says, 'I know the foundation of reality is love'.. It's written in your soul, you came forth from it. Religion reminds us of what we've all forgotten and what our soul already knows. When we see God it will not be a new discovery. It will be a profound recognition of that heart and soul of yourself that is already in union with God.

Meanwhile, the father waited. Through all the days and nights of the son's absence, the father waited.

Years ago there was a somewhat famous sermon in which the preacher argued that the most wonderful word in the Bible was the word "until." The preacher based this assertion on the use of that word in all the parables Jesus tells about lost things.

When his pietistic critics charged that Jesus was unworthy of having a following because he sat at table with sinners and even ate with them he told them a string of stories about things that were lost and then found.

There was the one about the lost sheep, and then the one about a lost coin, and finally the one about a lost boy.

And in each of the stories Jesus said that the shepherd searched *until* he found his lost sheep, the woman searched *until* she found her lost coin, and finally, the father waited *until* his lost son came home again.

The late New Testament professor, Kenneth Bailey, who lived in Israel for decades lets us know what is at stake for father and son in this story which Dr. Bailey sees through Palestinian eyes. He says that for a young man in Jesus's day to ask his father for his inheritance is to acknowledge his wish that his father would be dead. That is how the father would interpret such a request.

So for the father to go ahead and offer the boy money in response to such an unspeakable request is anything but customary.

Not customary, but, let me add, not totally unlikely either. I mean, let's admit it -- relationships between fathers and sons are complex. Shakespeare knew this, when he wrote *Hamlet*. And Arthur Miller knew it when he wrote *Death of a Salesman*.

Such relations are crazy complicated. Listen to this contemporary story of a grown son and his father who goes to a fundamentalist Christian church.

MY MOTHER EXPLAINS *that she didn't intend to show my father the pictures of my new tattoos. "They fell out of your letter when he was moving the dresser," she says, "and landed on the floor right in front of him. He was very upset, but I told him you were forty years old and had a right to make your own decisions."*
When my father gets on the phone, I ask why he gets so upset every time I acquire a new tattoo. I never set out to offend him.

He tells me that God is the most important thing in his life, and that my tattoos don't fit with his religious beliefs. "I feel I've failed somehow," he says, "by not passing on the importance of God and church to you."

I'm stunned. Although my beliefs and practices are quite different from my father's, I have always felt that he gave me a strong spiritual foundation.

“Dad,” I say, “I don’t go to church because your religion condemns me for being a gay man. What’s that got to do with tattoos?”

“You can’t help being gay,” my father replies, “but you can control whether or not you get a tattoo.”

That can make your head spin. So, anyway, look at how this plays out in our parable: the prodigal son takes the money and squanders it quickly. He hangs tight in the mess he’s made for himself until things get really dire. and then the only option left to him, he posits, is to go home.

And look, that’s as reckless a decision as the one he made to ask for his inheritance when he was too young to manage it. It’s reckless because the neighborhood he will return to will be up in arms against him the moment he comes over the hill. He is dead to them ... utterly.

So, to protect the young man, the father runs out to meet him at the edge of town, knowing that his son’s survival is at stake. The neighbors will want to kill him. Why?

They can’t have the precedent of a child from their town going unpunished for wanting his father dead and abandoning his family.

But, as I said, the father has missed the boy so deeply he is willing to take the harsh judgment his neighbors have onto himself.

But then we have the last section of the story about the older brother who is just like the neighbors who want the younger son beaten to death. Let me go back to where I began in this sermon and discuss this in the context of the salvation conundrum.

You know, those who begrudge the prospect of the final triumph of the grace of God on all people universally sound an awful lot like the older brother in the story who begrudges the generosity of his father. He hates that his dad has waited so long for his wayward brother to return. He wishes his dad had just forgotten him.

“What’s the point of me working so hard to be good if my dad is going to wait for the likes of my wretched younger brother?” Right?

What is the point of being a good “Christian” if God is going to forgive all the wicked unbelievers?”

To this kind of sentiment the father replies, “Son, you’ve always been loyal to me, and everything I have is yours, but don’t you see, it is your brother who was lost and who is found, it’s only right that we should celebrate this wonderful turn of events.”

And, of course, there is an older brother in every one of us. I know there is one in me that thinks the way this worked out is patently unfair, maybe even co-dependent of the father.

But then that part of me is the part that forgets how gracious God has been to me, letting me be born when I was into a world with so many opportunities for young white males. I mean, I am the heir of so much I should be grateful for. I don’t even know the half of it.

One day when I was 12 years old, I answered the phone in our home and the voice of a young man asked to speak to “Boyd.” Now, that was my father’s middle name, and the only people who knew this were family members. I didn’t recognize this voice, which turned out to be my long lost older brother. Well, my older *half*-brother.

My father had been married once before he’d married my mother, and he’d had two other children, and this one, his first son, had been kept away from him until the son, age 19, was fully grown and had looked up his dad and called him. He was a navy man, like my father had been. He was an electronic wiz, like my father, and he was also the spitting image of my dad.

I had lived with my father since I was born, but we were hardly alike at all. And this boy, whose voice I’d never heard, and who had never lived with my dad, was his double.

Who makes this stuff up? What kind of world is this? Let me close with a similar conundrum; a first-person story told by Jeffrey Wagner of New Hampshire

I WAS BORN SO MUCH LATER than my two siblings that I was virtually an only child. My father was an architect, and when I was young, he spent a lot of time with me. He even took me with him on business trips to Las Vegas, Reno, and Tahoe. He talked to me about architecture, tried to teach me algebra, and complained about my mother, who was depressed and a hypochondriac. Though I feigned interest in what he was saying, mostly I felt lost.

In all the time we spent together, I never got the impression that my father enjoyed being with me. Apparently, he doted on me (or so I've been told by my jealous brother and sister), but he was uncomfortable expressing his emotions and didn't seem to care about my interests and goals. He was an unhappy man who spent most of our time together talking about himself.

Years later, in therapy, I tried to understand my relationship with my father, but with little success. Then I had a son, and I struggled myself with the competing demands of career and family, of time spent alone and time spent with my son.

Like my father, I wanted to tell my son about my world, though I knew he wouldn't understand.

After my mother died, we twice brought my father east to visit us. He was the same, perhaps more so. He told stories I'd heard hundreds of times, talked only about himself, and was uninterested in what I was doing, how my life was going, and even what his grandson was like.

Driving him to the airport at the end of his last visit, I began to talk openly and was soon on the verge of tears. I explained that, until I had my son, Daniel, I'd never realized how much he'd had to juggle, and how hard it must have been sometimes. I could hardly speak. "[Dad], I just want to say that I appreciate everything you did for me," I concluded. "I love you."

My father looked out the window at the Boston skyline in the distance and said, "I've always liked the Hancock Building much better than the Prudential."

I never saw him again; he died nine months later. Afterward, my sister told me that he'd been quite moved by what I'd said.

You know, we never find out what happened between the older brother and the rest of his family in Jesus's story. Jesus doesn't say if they came to an understanding or if, when the younger son was welcomed home, it meant the older one and his father became estranged for life. That's often how such things play out.

Jesus left the story there because the ending isn't important – (I mean, it's a fictional story with a clear aim -- to open up our hearts; we who hear the story).

What is important is how *our* endings come about – whether we come to understand the heart of the father in the story – a heart that is ridiculously large, and crazy warm – a father who refuses to let anyone he loves be lost forever.

Amen