

The Parable of the Loving Father
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
September 5, 2021
Scripture told in story form at 9 am service

We are going to listen to God by becoming quiet. We can make our voices and bodies quiet. Let's take a moment to close our eyes and listen to our breath, breath in and out. Let us invite God's spirit into our minds and hearts to help us feel God's love right here and now as we hear our story. Let's open our eyes...

Now we are ready to listen to one of God's stories.

One day, the Pharisees and the scribes were complaining that Jesus welcomes everyone and anyone and even shares a meal with them!" So, Jesus told them this story:

Once there was a father who had two sons. The younger son told the father, "I'm getting out of here. I want my share of the money you have saved for me." This was different, because children didn't usually get that money until their father died.

The younger son packed his money and traveled far away. He spent everything he had having a good time. But then he was in trouble. The country where he was living didn't have enough food, and he was hungry. He was out of money and very hungry. He looked for a job, and finally someone hired him to feed pigs. He was so hungry that he'd be glad to eat the pigs' food... and no one shared with him.

That younger son said to himself, "The people who work for my father have more to eat than I do. I am always hungry. I am going home. I'll

say to my father, “I have done a bad thing. I lost everything you gave me. Treat me like one of the workers in your fields.”

So, he set off and returned to his father. But when he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with love, his father ran to his son and hugged and kissed him. The son told the father what he had planned to say, but instead of being angry, his father started planning a party. He told his servants, “Bring the best of everything for my son, a robe, a ring and new sandals. Fix a wonderful meal so that we can celebrate. My son was lost but now he has come back.”

And the party began.

The older son was working in the field. He heard music. Moving closer he heard music and saw dancing and wondered what was going on. Why a party? Why hadn't he been invited? A servant told him, “Your brother has come back. We are having a party to celebrate.” But he refused to go in.

His father saw him and begged for him to come in. But the older brother would not, and said to his dad, “You're giving a party for your son who left and lost all the money you gave him. I stayed here with you, working all the time... and you never threw a party for me.”

The father said, “Son, I know you have stayed with me, but we need to celebrate. I thought your younger brother was lost forever, but he's alive. He was lost, but not anymore.”

Thanks be to God. AMEN

This is the third and final installment in our mini-series on this parable... what today we'll call, most aptly, The Parable of the Loving Father. Love, compassion and grace are the heartbeat of this story.

Parables are more complex than they first seem and do not have a singular meaning. We simply cannot unpack and explore all there is to this parable in three weeks. We remember that Jesus told these short stories to illustrate the kingdom of God, vast and magnificent.

There's something about this story with its family dynamics that continues to fascinate. We seem to relate to different characters with each reading, depending upon our circumstances and age. At one time or another, we are the wandering child, longing to either leave home or return, the resentful older brother, or the compassionate father.

Today we'll focus on the father.

While today's listeners would think nothing of a child leaving home, early listeners may have been surprised to hear that the father gave his son half of the family wealth, instead of the third that he was due in that society. This was scandalous, and prodigal, in the sense of it was wastefully extravagant.

The younger son leaves and Jesus doesn't tell us how the father reacts. We can only use our imaginations to fill in the details. Does he try to stop him? Does he age more rapidly not knowing where his son is and wondering what he's doing? Does he cry often, rending his garments? Does he attempt to grow closer to his oldest son, savoring his presence?

In my mind, anyway, I imagine the father walking the perimeter of his property at the end of each day at sundown, watching and waiting for a beloved child's return. We aren't told exactly what time of day it was when the son, with a well-rehearsed explanation on his lips, comes within sight of the old man.

But then, comes a memorable scene that is cinematic in scope. The father runs toward his son, flings his arms around what must have been a filthy, exhausted man, kissing him, crying.

I have always been taught that this scene is remarkable because men in ancient Palestine didn't run, it would have been dishonorable and undignified. But scholar Amy Jill Levine points out that this is simply not true. She points out scripture that talks about running. Isaiah 40 says, "but they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary." We can see Peter running in fear after finding an empty tomb on that first Easter morning. Maybe it was an unusual thing, and emotional reaction, but not dishonorable. Of course, the dad would run, he thought his son was dead and then saw him alive. The Greek word that is used when the father kisses his son is the same one that is used when the woman kissed Jesus' feet at the home of Simon the Pharisee. With great fervor. So much emotion.

The father is filled with joy and wants to share it with others. That's what happens when we experience joy, isn't it... we want to share it? The dad throws a giant party. The ways of the world tell us that while this son is welcomed home, there are conditions to this homecoming... it has strings attached. The economy of God suggests that just welcoming the son home is not enough, there has to be an abundance... the robe, sandals, the food, and dancing.

It seems that everyone rejoices except the older brother, who learns of his brother's return from a servant. (To that I say, ouch.)

So, the father goes to the older son, who is angry and resentful of all the fuss being made over his brother, and pleads with him to join in. The dad lets him know that the party isn't complete without him. Seeing that this is truly the lost son, the father comforts and re-assures him of his love. He's always a part of the family and the father wants his family to be whole. With both sons, the father doesn't fix anything, but meets them where they are, offering a listening ear. Both know he will.

Many of you know the story that Tony Campolo tells of his time in Honolulu. Having flown from the east coast, he was awake and ready for the day at 3:30 am and left his hotel to find something to eat. On a little side street, he found the only place open was a greasy spoon diner. The owner/waiter, who he describes as filthy, welcomed him and offered him a greasy menu. As he was eating his donut and drinking coffee, eight or nine ladies who worked the streets came into the diner. (For kids – these women were pushed to the margins, misunderstood and had little respect from the world.)

As they sat down, one of them said, “Hey, tomorrow is my 39th birthday.” Another woman said, “So what? What do you want us to do about it? You want us to throw you a party? Yeah, right.” To which the first woman replied, “No, of course not. I’ve never had a party in my life. You don’t need to be so mean... I was just telling you.”

When the women left, Campolo asked the owner of the diner the woman’s name. Agnes, he said. Campolo said, “I have this idea, let’s throw her a surprise party tomorrow at this same time.” The owner and his wife would spread the word and make the cake and Campolo would bring the decorations.

The following night at 3:15, the diner was full. All the women who worked the streets were there. When Agnes came in and heard them all yell, Happy Birthday, she was overwhelmed, stunned, her knees buckled. Instead of cutting the cake right away, Agnes left the diner – just for a few minutes – to show it to her mom who lived a few doors down.

Left in the silent diner, Campolo offered a prayer for healing and wholeness for Agnes. When he was done, the owner said, “You’re a preacher? What kind of church are you from?” Campolo answered, “The

kind of church that throws a party for an Agnes at 3:30 in the morning.”
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRBM_YY_YX0)

The church of Jesus Christ is called to move into the world as agents of God’s love and compassion, bringing celebration and joy to those who have none. Not to ignore the suffering but seek the humanity within it, to listen and have compassion. We are to seek the lost, and welcome all.

As we come to the table of grace, The Lord’s Supper, we find welcome here. At this table, Christ meets us where we are, with forgiveness, love, and nourishment to be God’s people in our homes and communities. Maybe you feel lost or discouraged today, or hopeful, or sad, or resentful or encouraged, it’s all welcome here. As we know ourselves as God’s beloved, with all our foibles, we can be the conduit of God’s love in the world.

As we act with compassion, we rest in the reassurance, that, as the Brief Statement of Faith of the PCUSA reads,

“Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.” AMEN