

LENT 4C

March 14, 2010

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Joshua 5:9—12 Psalm 32 2 Corinthians 5:16—21 Luke 15:1—3, 11b—32

The young son had gone to San Francisco. He was out of money, out of friends, out of options. He had hit the bottom and was at wits ends. This lost son wrote a letter home to his parents living in the Seattle area. He wrote, “Dear Mom and Dad, I have sinned deeply against you. I have sinned against you and I have sinned against God and I am not worthy to be called your son. There is no reason for you to love me or welcome me back home. I am at the bottom of the barrel and I need to come back home. I hope that you would welcome me. I have been given a ticket for a train, a ticket to get me back to Seattle. The train comes past our farm south of Seattle. The train comes around the bend and right past our farmhouse. If you want me to come home, please put a white towel on the clothesline, out in the backyard near the tracks. I will then know that you want me to come back home. If there is no towel there, I understand. I will understand that it is not right for me to come back home.”

The young man sent the letter, got on the train, and started heading north. As he came closer and closer to home, he became more nervous inside and was pacing up and down the center aisle of the train. As the train came closer and closer to his farmhouse, he couldn't bear it anymore. He approached another man on the train, and he said to him, "Sir, around this next corner, this next bend, there is going to be a farm house on the left. A white house. An old red barn behind it. A dilapidated fence. There will be a clothesline in the backyard. Would you do me a favor and look and see if there is a white towel hanging on the clothesline? I know it sounds peculiar, but I can't bear to look."

Well, the train came closer and closer to the bend and started to go around the bend, and the young man's heart was racing as fast as it could. The man said, "Look, look, look. Open your eyes." The whole clothesline was covered with white towels. The oak trees were covered with white sheets. The barn roof was covered with sheets. The old dilapidated fence was covered with white sheets. There were sheets everywhere. The father and mother so deeply wanted their son to come back home.¹

¹ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_the_prodigal_son.htm

The Story of the Prodigal Son is a story of extravagant, lavish, and excessive grace. The love we see here is disproportionate, larger-than-life, and excessive. The mercy is benevolent, boundless, and generous. The kindness is vast, magnificent, and elaborate.

The Story of the Prodigal Son, also known as the Story of the Lost Son, is one of the best known parables of Jesus — if not one of the most recognized stories in the Bible. It is the third of three stories recorded in Luke 15 that Jesus uses to describe the all-out, no questions asked, and absolutely unconditional love of God. And while it is commonly referred to as “the story of the prodigal son” that title is not found anywhere in Luke’s gospel, and many commentators have argued that it would be better called “The Lost Son” which would connect it more readily to the parables of the “Lost Sheep” and “Lost Coin”—the two stories that Jesus tells just before he seals the deal with this story.

In all three short stories, the overwhelming theme is the love and concern that God has for the repentant and regretful sinner, as opposed to strictly for the unfailingly righteous. In fact, many people with no other understanding of the word “prodigal” mistakenly believe it means lost; it

actually means extravagant. In that sense, then the son went off to some far country and blew everything in extravagantly out-of-control living and after a change of heart returns home to the extravagant — even out of control — love, mercy and grace of his father.

Think about that: the forgiveness shown to the Prodigal Son is not conditional on good works, since the younger son has plainly done nothing “good” throughout the story, other than to return home — symbolic of repentance. And although he plans ahead what he will say while admitting his guilt to his father, his father accepts him even before he gets the chance to get half the confession out of his mouth. This is unconditional love.

Perhaps this parable should more appropriately be called the Story of the Waiting Father. It is the father who waits anxiously for his younger son's return. This story gives us a glimpse into the heart of a waiting God who waits for us. And it is a heart that beats with love, grace, and mercy for us. In the midst of this, the message is timeless: There's nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Nothing. Nothing, nothing can separate you.

For all of the times that we've taken what we thought belongs to us and blown out to our own "distant places"—surely a metaphor for going our own way—God is patiently waiting. For all of those times that we've told God, "I know what's better for me than you do," God is quietly walking by our side. We have a waiting God whose heart yearns for our return. In the meantime, God waits.

The father also watches. And there is something remarkable about this watching dad. Luke says it this way: "While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion..." I see the dad peering through the kitchen window. He watches for the familiar sight of his son's long legs, his hair, his face. The dad watches for what he knows will only be a matter of time. He waits, he watches. And then, finally, after what seems like an eternity, he sees him. While he was still far off, his father sees him and is filled with compassion.

The "distant country" is far more familiar than any of us would care to admit. It is that place—physically, emotionally, spiritually—that seems rather unfamiliar no matter how long we visit or live there. We've all been there. We've all been places where, when we're in our right minds and with

our wits about us make us feel shame and embarrassment at some level—or at least should. The distant country to which the son goes and from which he returns is that great metaphor for those places in our lives that do us no good.

But the hopeful word in this story is that the son makes a change—he turns toward home. The Greek word for that turning is “metanoia,” which has everything to do with a 180 degree shift in course. And the son goes back to his home and to his father. And the promise is that when we shift, turn, and make our way toward home, our heavenly dad is not only waiting in some passive way, but in an active, yearning way he is watching. The Father is actively watching the horizon for us to come back.

The son has rehearsed it. It is a moment of repentance, revision, and metanoia. “I will get up and 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.” And the waiting father is watching.

God is waiting and watching for our return. And when we come up over the horizon back into the familiar places, we see the father who stands at the door watching for us and we’re reminded that there’s nothing that can

separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Nothing. Nothing, nothing can separate you.

God is waiting. God is watching. God is also welcoming and there is something significant about this welcoming dad. It is in this welcome that we see the extravagant, lavish, excessive grace of a dad whose love is disproportionate, larger-than-life, and excessive, whose mercy is benevolent, boundless, and generous. Whose kindness is vast, magnificent, and elaborate.

Here is what we know for sure: The son sets off and goes to his father. While he is still a long way off, his father sees him and is filled with compassion. The waiting, watching dad runs to him, puts his arms around him, kisses him and welcomes him. Then the son says to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But this welcoming father interrupts and calls out to his servants: “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 is found!” And they began to celebrate.

The welcoming father shows all-out, no questions asked, and absolutely unconditional love for his son because there is nothing more important than having waited and watched and now welcoming his son back into the family.

The story of the waiting, watching, welcoming father is a story of immense, enormous, unreserved, and extravagant love. It is God's story for you and for me. And the truth of the story is that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Nothing. Nothing, nothing can separate you. There is nothing that you have done, are doing, or will do that is beyond God's ability to forgive. Even the turning that the son did and the turning that we will do over and over again is a turning stirred by the Holy Spirit in us. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Nothing. Nothing, nothing can separate you. Let's come home to that today.

Amen.

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