

Devotions for the Week of March 11, 2018

LARGE-PRINT

4th Sunday of Lent

North East United Methodist Church

By Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

Sunday, March 11, 2018

Read Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32.

The story of the Prodigal Son, the Lost Son, is a very familiar story, yet perhaps in its familiarity we have lost the radical message lying beneath the characters and their actions.

Scripture speaks of sin, and our need to repent, to cry out the words of John Newton, "*My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things; That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.*" This week, we look at a story that shares a vivid picture of what God does when someone does repent.

Often our focus in studying Jesus' parable is the son who ran off to a far-off country and squandered his father's inheritance, coming to the end-of-his-rope, returning home, and throwing himself at his father's mercy. If we are not focusing on the wayward son, we set our sights on the "good" brother, jealous and angry at the reception his rebellious younger brother receives when he returns home. But the focus of the story is the father. Jesus told them this story: "*A man had two sons.*"

In order to understand what Jesus is trying to convey through the father in the story, we do need to look at the younger son's actions. "*The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them.*" This was an outrageous, shameless request, tantamount to wishing your father was dead

because it was customary, it was acceptable only for a son to receive his inheritance after the death of his father. The son is therefore saying, "I wish you were dead, I want what is mine. I want it now." And it allowed him to perpetrate not only a shameless request, but a shameless rebellion. "*Not many days later, after he had received his part of the estate, the younger son gathered everything together,*" that means he turned it all into cash, and went on a journey into a distant country. There he squandered his estate with "*loose living.*"

Verse 17 is the turning point in the younger brother's story... "*When he finally came to his senses...*" This young man realizes how far he has fallen...he tells himself that he will go home and cry out to his father, "*Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.*" This young man has come to understand that he is "*a great sinner*" and he is in need of "*a great Savior.*"

The son made a choice, took the step toward home, a step begun in the heart. And as soon as the father saw that his son had turned toward home, he ran to meet him. Jesus was showing through His parable, the depth of love and mercy and compassion and grace the Father had for his son. Jesus was showing the Pharisees and us what God does when one is willing, when one chooses, to repent and turn back home to God, their Heavenly Father.

The younger son is welcomed home with open arms...barely able to get out the words of repentance he had rehearsed. What love! What grace! Our Heavenly Father's love is wonderful, extravagant, and beyond measure.

If you have strayed, turn toward home with a repentant heart. Take time tonight to thank God for God's grace, forgiveness, and amazing love.

Monday, March 12, 2018

Read Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32; Isaiah 53:6;

2 Corinthians 5:21; I Peter 2:24.

I want you to think again about how radical Jesus' parable was to the Pharisees who listened intently to His teaching. The Pharisees would have been right with Jesus through most of the story. The younger brother's need to repent and make restitution for his rebellion would have made sense to them. The Pharisees believed there is no instant reconciliation; the younger brother would have to earn his way back into his father's graces, perhaps working for years to pay back what he had taken. But then Jesus' words shocked and angered them...going against the legalism and teachings that had become such a part of who they were...the many rules that they taught others were needed to be followed in order to earn God's favor.

Rabbis taught that repentance was work a man does to earn God's favor when he feels sorry for his sin...you had to earn your way back. Yet, what does the father do...First, he sees his son coming down the road and he gets up and runs to him...runs to him.

Kenneth Bailey writes, *“One of the main reasons why Middle Easterners of rank do not run is that traditionally they all have worn long robes. This is true of both men and women. No one can run in along robe without taking it up into his or her hands. When this occurs, the legs are exposed which is consider humiliating...exposure of the legs was considered shameful.”* The father shames himself by running to his son, the son that the entire town would have known rebelled and shamed his father.

Why does the father run to his son? Not only because he loves him but to protect him. It would have been typical that one who had shamed his father, who had sinned, who returned

in rags, smelling of pigs, would be ridiculed, taunted, perhaps even beaten. By running to him, he cannot only protect his son, but he turns the taunts and ridicule on himself, legs exposed, shameful...the father takes the scorn. Isn't this what Jesus did for us?

And then, before restitution can be made, before the last words of repentance, "*Please take me on as a hired hand,*" can be spoken, a robe and ring are brought and the fatted calf killed. Radical, extravagant forgiveness.

John MacArthur writes, "*This is radical stuff, folks...The father condescends, humbles himself out of this deep love for this son, comes all the way from his house to the dirt of the village, runs through bearing the scorn and the shame, throws his arms around the penitent believing sinner who is coming to him in his filthy unclean rags...that father is doing exactly what Jesus did...exactly what He did. He came down into our village to run the gauntlet and bear the same and the slander and the mockery to throw His arms around us and kiss us and reconcile with us.*"

Take time tonight to reflect on such love...think hard on what Christ did for you and give God thanks.

Tuesday, March 13, 2018

**Read Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32; Ephesians 1: 3-10;
Ephesians 2: 1-10.**

The Pharisees were shocked at the Father's behavior...shocked at the thought of such forgiveness offered...Why? Because all of this...the father's taking on his son's scorn, forgiving his son, welcoming him back into the family, was all done without works. The son never gets out

the words, *“Make me as one of your hired men.”* The son doesn’t have to work his way back...the father has responded with complete forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus understood and taught us that *“God loves people because of who God is, not because of who we are.”* Paul writes, in Ephesians 2: 8-9, *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”* In Titus 3:5, it is written, *“He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.”*

So many people in the church are still trying to earn their way, earn God’s love, make up for their many mistakes. Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism preach a message of “works;” we earn our way to heaven. Jesus taught that God loves us and shows us grace through faith not works; therefore, we don’t serve God in order to earn God’s love...we serve God because God has first loved us. As Walter Trobisch writes, *“Christ accepts us as we are, but when he accepts us, we cannot remain as we are.”*

Give thanks for God’s love...accept His grace and do not try to earn it...live a life of gratitude for the love and forgiveness your Heavenly Father has shown you.

Wednesday, March 14, 2018

Read Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32; Matthew 7: 3-5.

We have to spend one more day looking at the story of the Prodigal Son because we cannot leave this story without looking at the older brother.

The younger brother has been lost...far away from His Heavenly Father...outside the boundaries of His Father’s household, but the older brother...he is also lost...he is

lost within the boundaries of His Father's household.

In many ways the older brother can be us...The older brother is angry when he discovers the grace his father is showing his younger brother now returned home. The scriptures reads, "*He was angry and would not go in*" to the party for his younger brother. How often do we have a similar attitude toward a wayward Christian brother and sister? How often are we less charitable to those who have sinned than God has been to us? "*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*"

I love the four points that Zane C. Hodges writes about the self-righteous older brother. He says that Jesus' parable, particularly the character of the older brother, teaches us that (1) We should not overestimate our service; (2) We shouldn't criticize our Father's actions; (3) We should heed our Father's gentle rebuke; and (4) We should share our Father's joy. He goes on to say, "*The story of the self-righteous brother of the prodigal son carries a salutary reminder. Even those who remain in the Christian fellowship [those in the church] can get so out of touch with God's heart that they miss God's 'feast of joy' when a backslider returns to the fold. But the same gracious Father who welcomes his prodigal sons and daughters home, also urges his self-righteous children to soften their hearts & join in the celebration.*"

Do you relate to the older brother? Do you hold judgment over others, who perhaps lost their way? Do you consider yourself and your service greater than others? Do you share in your Father's joy when one who was lost is found?

Take time tonight to pray for those you know who have lost their way and ask God to remove any self-righteous attitude you may have.

Thursday, March 15, 2018

**Read Romans 14: 10-12; John 13: 34-35;
Matthew 25: 34-35.**

Philip Yancey, in his book, What's So Amazing About Grace? tells the story of a woman who was selling her body on the streets, and much worse, in order to buy food for her two-year old daughter. Yancey writes, *“At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to the church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. ‘Church!’ she cried. ‘Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.’”*

Many times, Christians cannot even understand that they, themselves, are loved by God, let alone that God loves the downtrodden and outcasts of our society; people we truly don't want to touch or get to know. Therefore, many Christians are either living with guilt and feelings of unworthiness or are condescending and self-righteous to others.

Are you self-righteous, judging your neighbor, not offering unconditional love to those around you? Are you welcoming all into the church regardless of dress or background?

Pray God will help you, not only know that you are loved and forgiven, but will help you offer grace & love to those you believe are living contrary to God, just as God first offered grace & love to you.

Friday, March 16, 2018

**Read Jonah 4:2; Isaiah 54:8; Nehemiah 9:17;
Daniel 9:18; Genesis 3; Micah 7: 18-19
Hosea 2:14 thru Hosea 3:5.**

Read and reflect on God's grace in the Old Testament...Israel forgiven time and time again, the city of

Ninevah spared after Jonah visited, David forgiven for adultery and murder, countless examples of God's mercy. Even Adam & Eve, when told if they ate from the tree they would die...even after they rebelled, they were allowed to live, and God even provided furs for them, a sacrifice for their sin. Hosea offers grace to his wife Gomer even after she left home for a life of prostitution just as God offered grace to Israel after Israel left God. God has always loved us and offered us grace, forgiveness, new life, second chances. God has done this because God desires above all else a relationship with us.

Take time to sit with God, thanking God for this relationship & grace.

Saturday, March 17, 2018

***Read and Reflect on the Scriptures for the Fourth
Sunday in Lent: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21;
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10.***

Take Time Again to Read and Reflect On:

INVITATION TO THE OBSERVANCE OF LENTEN DISCIPLINE

How Are You Observing a Holy Lent?

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: the early Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration there should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation. During this season converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins and had separated themselves from the community of faith were reconciled by penitence and

forgiveness and restored to participation in the life of the Church. In this way, the whole congregation was reminded of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need we all have to renew our faith. I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to observe a holy Lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word. To make a right beginning of repentance, as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now bow before our Creator and Redeemer in a moment of silence and reflection.

***“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.”***

-Psalm 51:10

Be in prayer tonight, join a small group, read and study the weekly devotions, pray, & serve. Live out your commitment to God and the Church.

***Don't Forget to
Invite Someone to Church Tomorrow!***

