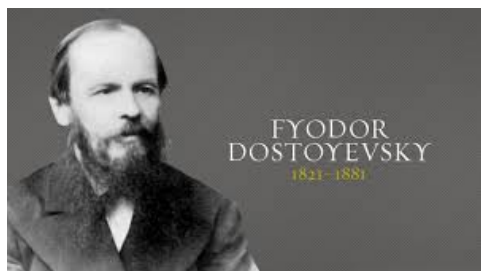


SONTANNED: Fun in the Sun
Message for June 10, 2018
North East United Methodist Church
Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

Thirty young men, dressed in shrouds (and thus, nearly naked), were led to the scaffold. The morning was bitter, the temperature below freezing, as they were compelled to stand for half an hour while the burial service was slowly read. He had spoken out against the current regime...treason.

Facing them stood the soldiers with their muskets. A pile of coffins was stacked suggestively in a corner of the yard. At the last moment, with the muskets actually at the shoulders of the guards, a white flag was waved, and it was announced that the czar had commuted the sentence to ten years' exile in Siberia. Several of the prisoners lost their reason under the strain; several others died shortly afterward. Author...Fyodor Dostoyevsky...



...passed courageously through the ordeal, but it affected his nerves; he never recalled the experience without a shudder, and he referred to it with horror in several of his books.

On Christmas Eve, 1849, he commenced the dreadful journey to Omsk and remained in Siberia...he wrote, "*Like a man buried alive, nailed down in his coffin.*" On his arrival in that desolate region, two women slipped a New Testament into his hand and, taking advantage of a moment when the officer's back was turned, whispered to him to search it carefully at his leisure. Between the pages he found twenty-five rubles. The money was a comfort to him; but the New Testament itself proved to be infinitely more.

His daughter, Aimee, tells us in her book Fyodor Dostoyevsky: A Study (1921) that during his exile the little new Testament was his only solace. "*He studied the precious volume from cover to cover, pondered every word; learned much of it by heart; and never forgot it. All his works are saturated with it, and it is this which*

gives them their power. Many of his admirers have said to me that it was a strange chance that ordained that my father should have only the gospels to read during the most important and formative years of his life. But was it a chance? Is there such a thing as chance in our lives? The work of Jesus is not finished; in each generation he chooses his disciples, beckons to them to follow Him, and gives them the same power over the human heart that He gave to the poor fishermen of Galilee."

Aimee Dostoyevsky believed it was by that divine hand that the Testament was presented to her father that day. *"Throughout his life," she adds, "he would never be without his old prison Testament, the faithful friend that had consoled him in the darkest hours of his life. He always took it with him on his travels and kept it in a drawer in his writing-table, within reach of his hand. He consulted it in the important moments of his life."*

In Siberia, Dostoyevsky discovered the beauty of the parable of the prodigal son. Siberia was the far country. It was there that he was the prodigal among the husks and the swine. His companions were the lowest of the low and the vilest of the vile.

Dostoyevsky writes, *"One sees the truth more clearly when one is unhappy,"* he wrote from Siberia. *"And yet God gives me moments of perfect peace; in such moments I love and believe that I am loved; in such moments I have formulated my creed, wherein all is clear and holy to me. This creed is extremely simply: here it is. I believe that there is nothing lovelier, deeper, more sympathetic, more rational, more manly and more perfect than the Savior: I say to myself with jealous love that not only is there no one else like Him, but that there could be no one."*

On his bended knees, Dostoyevsky blessed God for sending him into the Siberian steppes. For it was amidst those stern and awful solitudes that he, a homesick and penitent prodigal, found the road that leads to the Father's house. The parable that had opened to him a paradise in the midst of perdition was in his thoughts through all the years that followed.

Years later, Dostoyevsky lay on his bed dying. *"He made us come into the room,"* his daughter recalled, *"and, taking our little hands in his, he begged my mother to read the parable of the prodigal son. He listened with his eyes closed, absorbed in his thoughts. 'My children,' he said in his feeble voice, 'never forget what you have just heard. Have absolute faith in God and never despair of His pardon. I love you dearly, but my love is nothing compared with the love of God. Even if you should*

be so unhappy as to commit some dreadful crime, never despair of God. You are His children; humble yourselves before Him, as before your father; implore His pardon, and He will rejoice over your repentance, as the father rejoiced over that of the prodigal son."

The parable of the Prodigal Son...called by many to be the “*greatest short story*” in the world...found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15...called by many to be “*the Gospel in the Gospel*.”

Luke 15:1 tells us, “*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*”



The religious leaders, the Pharisees, are offended by the group of men and women flocking to hear Jesus, to sit at His feet and listen to His teachings. To the Pharisees, these people were sinners; they did not keep Jewish law. In fact, the Pharisees labeled them, “*People of the Land*.” Pharisaic law stated, “*When a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey.*” A Pharisee was forbidden to be the guest of any such man or to have him as a guest. It was their aim to avoid every contact with people who did not observe the Jewish law.

As William Barclay points out, strict Jews believed that “*there would be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God*.” Surprisingly, they found Jesus surrounding Himself with such sinners and speaking a very different message...a message that stated “*there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*.” Thus; they were shocked to the core that Jesus would keep company with

these “*People of the Land*,” these outsiders, these sinners...let alone state that God would accept them, love them.

Luke 15: 11-32 (NIV)

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'"

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

The focus of the story is the father..."Jesus told them this story: 'A man had two sons.'"

As William Barclay points out, *"It should never have been called the parable of the prodigal son, for the son is not the hero. It should have been called the parable of the loving father, for it tells us rather about a father's love than a son's sin."*

But 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 son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die.'"

This was an outrageous...a 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." A shameless rebellion.

"So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living," Another translation states, *"...he squandered his estate with loose living."*

Luke 15:17 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 prodigal makes a choice, takes the step toward home, a step begun in the heart.

What I want you to focus on though is not the son’s repentance, but the Father’s response to that repentance. 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.”*

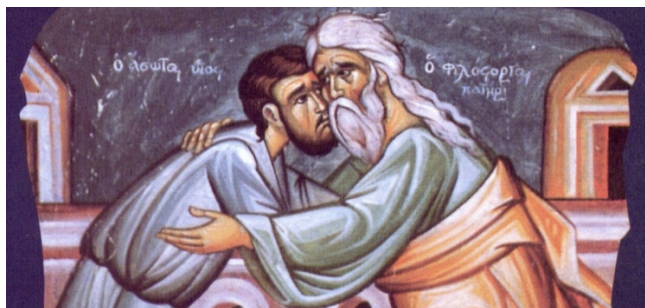
The father shames himself by running to his son, the son that the entire town would have known rebelled and shamed his father.



And 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, and perhaps even beaten. By running to him, he cannot only protect his son, but he turns the taunts and ridicule on himself, legs exposed, shamed...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 fattened 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."

According to the world, to society, this is unfair; but, God's grace goes in opposition to that which society teaches. Grace or the unmerited love of God is offered without price. Grace is not about getting what you deserve, it is about getting what you do not deserve. God's love is not based on our abilities, how hard we have worked.

God loves people because of who God is, not because of who we are or because of what we have done.

Throughout the Bible, in the Kingdom of God, there are dozens of examples of God's "*unfair love*."

- Israel forgiven time and time again.
- The city of Ninevah spared after Jonah visited.
- David forgiven for adultery and murder.
- 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.
- Zaccheus the tax collector after cheating the people, his own people, Jesus gives him the great honor of eating in his home and Zaccheus receives forgiveness.
- The woman caught in adultery, ready to be stoned, Jesus reaches down and lifts up out of the dirt, forgiving her sins.
- Peter being embraced by Christ on the beach after denying Him three times.
- The Prodigal Son after taking his inheritance, wasting it, and ruining His father's name is taken back with open arms and given the best robe and fattened calf.

Perhaps the most radical example of God's "unfair love," of God's grace, is found in Luke 23: 35-43 (New Living Translation)

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Michael Yaconelli, in his book, Messy Spirituality, writes, “*God’s grace is unfair. How unfair! Shouldn’t the thief have been asked to repent, to make amends, to at least declare he was sorry? No lectures, no sermons, no teaching or demands for repentance, Jesus just ushers the man into the kingdom of God.*”

The Father running to meet his son along the road...forgiving his son after what he did...The Pharisees were shocked at the Father’s behavior...shocked at the thought of such forgiveness offered...because everything...the father’s taking on his son’s scorn, forgiving his son, welcoming him back into the family...everything was 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.



Like the Prodigal Son, we are given the opportunity to turn back to our Heavenly Father, to turn back to God, and accept His gift of love. We are given the

opportunity, the choice, to accept the gift of Jesus Christ and become SONTANNED, allowing Christ to cover our sins, our past, everything about us, with His love. God is ready to shine His light upon us and change the complexions of our hearts.



Medical people advise us that it is not healthy to stay in the sun too long in order to get a deep, “healthy” tan. A “healthy” tan is an oxymoron. Healthy suntans can really be dangerous and carcinogenic. When it comes to basking in the light of Christ, the opposite occurs.



Our spiritual health gets better, not worse. As we bask in the light of His presence, our spiritual complexions become deeper and richer, and we experience the grace and forgiveness the Prodigal felt when he saw His Father running toward him and felt His Father’s arms embrace him.

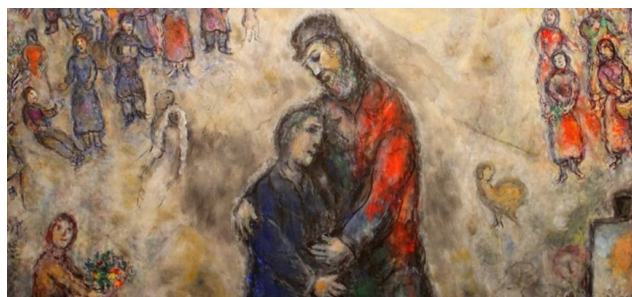


It is then...when the world looks at us, hears our testimony, that they know we have been in the SON's presence.

Paul writes, in Ephesians 2:8-9 (New Living Translation), ***“God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.”***

In Titus 3:4-5 (New Living Translation), it is written, ***“But then God our Savior showed us his kindness and love. He saved us, not because of the good things we did, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins and gave us a new life through the Holy Spirit.”***

The father, watching and waiting for his son to return...sees him far off and runs to him...forgiving his son. Jesus' parable teaches us that God forgives us and takes us back and celebrates our return no matter how disgusting we look and feel when we decide to return to him. No matter what type of mud and how much we have wallowed in it, he runs to us and embraces us, and says: *“forget about your explanations and apologies, all is already forgiven, let's celebrate that you're back where you belong!”*



Philip Yancey once wrote an article called “The Atrocious Mathematics of Grace”. He writes, *“From childhood we are taught how to succeed in the world of ungrace. ‘You get what you pay for.’ ‘The early bird gets the worm’. ‘No pain, no gain.’ I know these rules well because I live by them. I work for what I earn; I like to win; I insist on my rights. I want people to get what they deserve. But Jesus’ parables about grace teach a radically different concept.*

“...The more I reflect on Jesus’ parables proclaiming grace, the more tempted I am to apply the word atrocious to describe the mathematics of the gospel. I believe

Jesus gave us these stories to call us to step completely outside our tit-for-tat world of ungrace and enter into God's realm of infinite grace.

“If I care to listen, I hear a loud whisper from the gospel that I did not get what I deserved. I deserved punishment and got forgiveness. I deserved wrath and got love. I deserved debtor’s prison and got instead a clean credit history. I deserved stern lectures and crawl-on-your knees repentance. Instead, I got a banquet spread for me.”

Like the older brother in Jesus’ story, we often fail to see the sin we ourselves carry; therefore, we can be very slow to show grace to others.

There are also times we DO see our sin, but we do not accept God’s grace for ourselves and instead allow ourselves to be weighed down by the burden of guilt.

“Amazing Grace...how sweet the sound...that saved a wretch like me...I once was lost, but now am found...was blind but now I see...”

John Newton wrote those words.



Newton was on a homeward voyage, while he was attempting to steer the ship through a violent storm, he experienced what he was to refer to later as his “*great deliverance*.” He recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost and the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, “*Lord, have mercy upon us.*”

Later in his cabin he reflected on what he had said and began to believe that God had addressed him through the storm and that grace had begun to work for him. For the rest of his life he observed the anniversary of May 10, 1748 as the day of his conversion, a day of humiliation in which he subjected his will to a higher power.

He opened his eyes to the horrors of the slave trade which he was participating in, making money on...he became an advocate against the slave trade, for the first time being able to see the injustice and pain he had caused...for the first time his eyes

were opened to these slaves...these men and women of color...being children of God...having great beauty...for the first time he looked deep within and he came face to face with his own sin...his own ugliness.

“I once was blind but now I see.” John Newton discovered the biblical truth that only those who realize their own blindness can learn to see.

When he was 82 years old, he was quoted saying:

***“My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things;
That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”***

Yes, we must recognize the truth that *“We are great sinners.”* But we must also recognize that *“We have a great Savior.”*

Once Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners when they had finally been defeated and had returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take a dire vengeance, but he answered, *“I will treat them as if they had never been away.”*

It is the wonder of the love of God that He treats us like that...for when we turn toward home, filth and all, our Heavenly Father lifts his robes and runs to meet us.



The Pharisees of our day, like long ago, cringe, but the Kingdom of Heaven rejoices, as our Heavenly Father throws His arms around us, robes us in the finest robes, prepares a banquet before us, and lavishes us with kisses.