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First Presbyterian Church of Greenville
Title: *How Good Do We Have to Be?*¹
Text: Luke 15:11-32

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 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.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "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.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound." Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

The story of the Prodigal Son gives us a lens into the life of community; it shows us how community dynamics can play out and operate. In this instance, we see how community dynamics play out in the context of a family. Perhaps when we hear this story read – we find ourselves gravitating toward a particular character in the story. Which character do you identify with in this story?

¹ This sermon title is taken from a book of the same name, written by Rabbi Harold Kushner.

The characters in this story of the Prodigal Son are not just characters written on a page; each character resides in each one of us. At certain times in our lives, we have played each character in this story. Reading the parable is like looking into a mirror of our own lives as individuals; it is like looking into a mirror of our communities (and how relationships can play out in the context of community).

Perhaps we relate to each character in this story at some point in our lives. At times, we may be like the younger prodigal son – taking the gifts that God has given to us and abusing them, yet to find ourselves in need confessing our mistake and asking for forgiveness. Or maybe we find ourselves like the older brother – self-righteous (entitled), angry and jealous, and – like the younger son – also in need of reconciliation now with God and with his family. There are also times when we play the role of the father – offering (risking) our support, forgiveness, or a word of grace to a person in need.

Yet – we move to real vulnerability when we claim which character in the story of the prodigal son we tend to be. I truly believe that – while we may play the part of each character in this story – we tend to play one particular character in the story again and again.

There is theory in the field of psychology known as Family Systems Theory.

One of the teachings of Systems Theory is that: “The role that you played in the family of your upbringing tends to be the role that you play in society today.”

We all default to the patterns we learned as children. If we grew up feeling as though we were betrayed, we tend to continue to feel betrayed in relationships. If we grew up like the older son in the story of the prodigal son – proper and obedient, always sure to dot all our I’s and cross all our T’s – we will probably carry on a legacy of perfectionism. We will probably grow up struggling with the perfectionism that we continue to demand on ourselves and others. If we grew up like the younger prodigal son in this story – an adventurer, experimental, and searching - in our adult lives we will probably struggle staying on course, and keeping our commitments.

While serving as a chaplain in the hospital – I remember avoiding at all costs psychological assessment: naming my patterns of behavior and spiritual needs. I thought: “I’m far too complex a person to be reduced to a particular type of person – with particular patterns of behavior.” My supervisor helped me to see that perhaps it was my resistance to spiritual and psychological assessment that made it difficult for me to recognize my own spiritual needs. Around that time I was reading a novel by the postmodern writer, Douglas Coupland, called “Miss Wyoming” encouraged me to

dig deep and claim my spiritual needs without shame or fear. Coupland said: “A person who tells the truth about himself is never boring.” In order to change, we must first tell the truth about ourselves: our own needs, our patterns of behavior that need to change. These are hard to change.

An old mentor of mine, Dennis Kenny, once told me: “Change typically happens when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of changing.”

The patterns of behavior we learn as children can undermine the dreams we have as adults – and so, we have to work to name what patterns are unhealthy and risk new behavior.

As I read the story of the Prodigal Son – I find myself connecting most with the younger prodigal son or the older son. Sometimes I am like the older brother – the good kid, following the law, living by the rules, doing my job. Other times I am like the younger son – falling flat on my face and yet experience the grace of God.

Yet – it is the calling of each and every Christian (it is the calling of each one of us) to become like the Father in the story.

One of my favorite spiritual writers – Henri J.M. Nouwen – wrote a book called: “Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming,” which is about this very thing; it is about how we are called to be like the Father.

Just a quick side note about Henri Nouwen: When my dad handed me Henri Nouwen’s book “Life of a Beloved” – I truly believe that the book, not only encouraged me to seek a deeper relationship with God, but it also planted a seed for me to consider going into the ministry. My father and I both believe that the book is a summary of our ministry and calling.

In his book: “Return of the Prodigal Son,” Nouwen tells a story about how he visited a museum of art in St. Petersburg, Russia called the Hermitage. He views many world renowned pieces of artwork, but God speaks to him dramatically through one in particular – Rembrandt’s depiction of the story of the Prodigal Son. This painting of Rembrandt’s is one of the last paintings he did before his death.

Nouwen reflects on this painting. He says: “Sometimes I feel like the older brother and sometimes I am like the younger brother. I wonder which one we are supposed to be.” Nouwen’s mentor says: “Henri, we are supposed to be like the Father!”

Nouwen reflects: “For a long time the father remained ‘the other,’ the one who would receive me, forgive me, offer me a home, and give me peace and joy. The father was the place to return to, the goal of my journey, the final resting place. It was only gradually and often quite painfully that I came to realize that my spiritual journey would never be complete as long as the father remained an outsider.” (p. 120 -121)

It is our calling to become like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus affirms this when he says: “Be compassionate as your Father (in Heaven) is compassionate.”

We are to open ourselves up to receive God’s forgiveness, and yet...

We must also be the one who forgives other people!

Like the younger prodigal son, we must be welcomed home, and yet...

We must also be the one who welcomes others home!

We are to receive compassion and mercy...

While we offer the gifts of compassion and mercy to each other as well!

Becoming the compassionate Father in the story of the Prodigal Son is the ultimate goal of the spiritual life. We cannot remain the child in our relationship with God. But we must claim that we can become like the Father! We must “...stretch out our own hands in blessing to receive with ultimate compassion our children (the people of this world), regardless of how they feel or think about us.” (Nouwen, p. 124)

We do not need to be a parent in order to be the compassionate Father in the story of the Prodigal Son. That is only one of many ways that we may be given the opportunity to offer God’s love and grace. You can practice the compassion of the father anywhere there are people around you – in the church or in the local community around you. The church, in part, is a place intended for us to practice the compassion of the Father.

The story of the Prodigal Son has taken on a certain literal meaning for me over the past several months. I have experienced being a Dad to Sonja as an opportunity to practice the compassion of the father in the parable.

As a parent – and a pastor – it can be overwhelming to know that my choices and actions can impact the people I love both positively and negatively.

My dad, Cliff Hayes, reminded me recently – he said: “Jonas – relationships are an art. There are not formulaic answers or packaged solutions when it comes to building relationships in community.”

Throughout my life and ministry – my dad has encouraged me in the paths I have chosen. On the day I was ordained, my dad said: “Jonas, I thank God that you do not live a symmetrical life in an asymmetrical world.” Along the way – we are bound to make some mistakes, and we need not be overly hard on ourselves inflicting too much guilt or shame. Yet – we must be open to offer our mistakes to God as tools for reflection.

The most humbling realization for me as a parent or as a pastor is this: I am simply one broken person telling another broken person where to go to find bread.

We do live in a world where our choices and actions affect people both positively and negatively. Sometimes – against our best intentions – we end up hurting the people we love and care about.

The story of the Prodigal Son reminds us of this reality.

When the father welcomes the younger prodigal son home – the older son, not only gets angry, but he refuses to celebrate with everyone. This is not a cut and dry situation where there is a clear solution that can make everyone happy. It appears natural for the father to welcome the prodigal son home, for while the son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. And yet, now the father’s decision is threatening to either diminish or destroy his relationship with the older son.

And so it plays out in our own communities. Perhaps we would like to think that our conflicts are simply between ourselves and one other person. We might even say: “Hey – this is between him and me, no one else.” This is not true! – and the story of the prodigal son reminds us of this. Imagine if the father said to the older son: “Son – this is between the prodigal and me, so get out of this.” This parable reminds us that a whole community is affected by the actions of 1 or 2 people. A whole community is affected by unresolved conflict. And we, as the church, are to point to the reconciling love of Jesus Christ... and we are to be Christ’s reconciling presence to each other.

What I admire most about the father in this parable is how he responds to the older son’s grief. He says: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we

had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

The older son desperately wants his father’s approval, but the father, in essence, is saying: *the point is that love is not based on how “good” we are.* Love is not about being “good.” Love believes all things, endures all things, and hopes all things.

Rabbi Harold Kushner says: “Life is not a trap set for us by God, so that He can condemn us for failing. Life is not a spelling bee, where no matter how many words you have gotten right, if you make one mistake you are disqualified. Life is more like a baseball season, where even the best team loses one third of its games and even the worst team has its days of brilliance.” In baseball, there are lots of innings, some strikeouts, some errors, a few good hits and even a home run now and again.

As we go forward in our journey of faith – we will love each other, and we will fail to love each other. At different times in our lives, we will play various characters in the story of the prodigal son.

No matter which character we are currently playing, Christ offers us an opportunity to love and to work for reconciliation.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.