**February 19th, 2023 Service**

**Scripture:**

Luke 15:11-32

11He also said, “A man had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate I have coming to me.’ So he distributed the assetsto them. 13Not many days later, the younger son gathered together all he had and traveled to a distant country, where he squandered his estate in foolish living. 14After he had spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he had nothing. 15Then he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16He longed to eat his fill from the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one would give him anything. 17When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food, and here I am dying of hunger! 18I’ll get up, go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. 19I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers.”’ 20So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. 21The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22“But the father told his servants, ‘Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let’s celebrate with a feast, 24because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ So they began to celebrate.

25“Now his older son was in the field; as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26So he summoned one of the servants, questioning what these things meant. 27‘Your brother is here,’ he told him, ‘and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28“Then he became angry and didn’t want to go in. So his father came out and pleaded with him. 29But he replied to his father, ‘Look, I have been slaving many years for you, and I have never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. 30But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your assetswith prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’

31“‘Son,’ he said to him, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

**Meditating on the Scriptures**

**Message:** “A father had two sons…”

There are very few stories more powerful, or more well known than this one. Often, we call it the parable of the “prodigal son”. The story of the son who lavishly and recklessly spent everything that he had until there was nothing left. It’s a story that captures our hearts, and grips our attention. It’s a tale of repentance, and unconditional love to even those who are farthest away.

But I’ve purposely called our message today something different. It’s the story of a father who had *two* sons. And I want to make sure that we spend time with both, because the parable is otherwise incomplete. We do not fully grasp what Jesus is so powerfully sharing with us unless we see not only the younger son, but the older son as well. Even more , Jesus is showing us that the Father loves and reaches out to both.

We will trace the path of two sons, two stories, two responses to the generous love of a father. Two extremes that we are liable to fall into ourselves.

The first story is that of the younger brother. The one often called prodigal. It seems that younger children have always received a bad wrap. They’re usually caricatured as immature, entitled, spoilt, and lazy. They get everything that they ask for, and never have to work for any of it!

I grew up in what we often politely call a “blended” family. Meaning that some of my siblings have a different parent, and are a fair bit older than I am. That means that I grew up as the little brother to my two older brothers. They once sat my parents down to let them know how concerned they were about the very lax upbringing I was receiving, because they were sure I would have no sense of work ethic or discipline at all. But I also grew up as the older brother to my sister. And because my brothers were a fair bit older, it was just my sister and me for much of my childhood. I too, as the older sibling, was very worried about how spoilt she was, and how it seemed my parents simply let her have or do whatever she wanted.

The younger brother in Jesus’ parable was the epitome of a youngest sibling. No matter how entitled your youngest siblings were, they likely didn’t go up to your parents and say, “I sort of wish you were already dead so I could have your money. Could you just give it to me now?” It wasn’t just shockingly rude, it was hurtful, and showed that the younger brother had no care for his father, or their family. Dividing up the family estate was no simple task. Just like today, much of their wealth was likely tied up in property or land, and it would have meant splitting up the family farm to separate everything.

Perhaps even more shocking than the request, is that the father in the parable says yes! With a broken heart, he went about liquidating assets so that the younger brother could go and waste it in a far-off country. And just days later, the younger brother does exactly that. He packs up all that he has, and leaves his family in the dust.

He finds lots to excite and amuse him in that far-off land, finds friends who are more than happy to help him spend his fortune, and eats, drinks, parties, and sleeps his heart out. There is no concern for the future.

But then the future hits like a ton of bricks. The money has run out, and just as the last coins roll out, a drought rolls in. There is no food anywhere. As a Jewish man, there would have been nothing more unthinkable than working to feed and take care of swine- they were unclean and out of bounds for his people, but he didn’t have a choice. He went from the comfortable son of a wealthy landowner to being poorer than a pig.

I’m not sure if you’re familiar with pig slop, but it isn’t the most appetising of foods. Whatever pods and leftovers they had were hardly gourmet, but the man who once paid for the whole table at the fanciest restaurants now longed for pig’s pods, but no one will give him even that. Talk about being humbled. Talk about being brought low and dropped from the top of the food chain to the very bottom.

He had a lot of time to think now; and think he did. He couldn’t help but think back to the home and father he had cared so little for at the time. He had been so happy to shake the dust of that place off his feet, but now, he thought fondly of the life of even the poorest of his father’s hired hands. At least they had lots to eat!

Perhaps, if he begged and pleaded, his father would hire him on to do some work so that he at least wouldn’t starve to death. He had the speech all ready. “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers.” He knows that his only hope is that he is his father’s son. He has nothing to offer, no leg left to stand on. Only his identity as his father’s son, and even that he feels unworthy of.

So he left the place he had been so eager to run to. The place that fed pigs better than him. And he went home. Home to his father. But he doesn’t make it back. Because while he’s still barely a speck in the distance, his father hikes up his robe and begins running. He knows his son’s walk, even far away. He knows his son. He’s been waiting, hoping that this day would come, and he has a speech prepared too.

When he gets to his son, he throws his arms around him, kisses him, and tears stream down his face. His son, no doubt shocked by this turn of events, and wanting to make sure he doesn’t ruin his chance begins his speech, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father has his speech as well, and he cuts him off, crying it out to all who will listen: “Quick! Bring out the best robe- my robe- and put it on his smelly, gaunt frame! Put a ring on his thin finger, put sandals on his dusty, cracked feet, and for goodness sake, bring out the fattened calf, and let’s put some meat on these brittle bones! Today, we’re celebrating! Because this man, this son of mine, was dead, but is alive again! He was lost, but now he is found!”

This son had believed that he was no longer worthy to be called by that name, but his father wouldn’t hear it. “This is my son!” He cries it out to all who will listen.

But there is someone who doesn’t hear his father’s joyful cries. There is a second son. An older son has been out all day, working, as he always has, diligently in the fields. He comes home to find the house in an uproar. There is music playing, and people are dancing. The fattened calf is being roasted outside, and there is wine flowing freely. The celebration is in full swing. Understandably, he has no idea what is going on, and he calls to a servant nearby, “what’s going on?” The servant replies, “ your *brother* is home, and your *father* is celebrating!”

The older son is angry. He doesn’t have a brother! Only a scoundrel who broke his father’s heart and made off with most of the family fortune! He responds with anger and resentment.

The father begins to wonder where his older son is, and hears that he is sulking outside. And so, for the second time today, the father goes and seeks out one of his sons who is far away. The Father goes to his son and *pleads* with him to join in the celebrations.

But the older son is having none of it. “Look! I’ve been slaving all these years for you, I’ve *never* disobeyed you, and you’ve never given me anything! But then along comes this “son” of *yours*- the one who said he’d rather you were dead, and made off with a chunk of the family fortune, spending it on prostitutes- and you spare no expense for him!”

He is spitting mad. He doesn’t address his dad as “father” like his brother had done. Something that was both disrespectful, but also shows that he doesn’t feel like his son. He has worked himself up to believe that he’s little more than a slave to his father. Now it’s his turn to distance himself from the family, because he isn’t getting what he wants. All his years of service have been to get what he wanted, not out of love for his father. And so, he has never felt his father’s love. He doesn’t feel like a son, and so he is even more mad that his brother is getting all the things that he wanted.

The older son wanted the ring, and the best robe, and the fattened calf. He wanted what he thought he deserved. In his mind, you get what you give. He deserved everything, because he had worked for it, and his brother deserved nothing, not even to be called his brother, because he hadn’t lived up to his potential. He didn’t recognise the love of his father, and so he cannot love his brother, or, indeed, himself. His identity is in his work, and in what he does, not in whose son he is.

“Son!” his father replies. “You are *always* with me. And everything I have is yours! Don’t you see that? Doesn’t my love toward your brother give you every comfort that I will be just as generous to you?” His father reminds him of who he is. Because he is his son, everything the father has will be his! But the older son has forgotten that. He has convinced himself that he must work to earn his father’s love and gifts, and then he is crushed when life doesn’t turn out like that.

Which of us haven’t wondered the same thing? How come good things seem to happen to these horrible people, and yet we do our best to follow God, but haven’t received what we want? My wife and I lost a child before birth, and there were moments where I wondered, how come *they* got what they wanted? They don’t even pretend to care about God, and here I am, serving as best I can, and we don’t have the one thing we want most? But that way of thinking is as dangerous as it is tempting.

Most of us want what the younger son got: everything he asked for, right away. But there is a warning about that: getting all we think we want isn’t likely what is best for us. It will leave us feeling hollow, and as starving for what we need as ever before. God does not promise we will get everything we want when we want it. Quite the opposite. He promises that those who listen to him will find that this world is not very friendly. We will experience trials, and disappointments. And that doesn’t mean God has forgotten us, or that he does not love us. It means that he is calling us to wait to receive our inheritance at the proper time. “Everything I have is yours!” he says.

When we do not recognise that we are God’s children, we will miss out on the peace and assurance it brings. We will begin to feel that we are like slaves who work and work but never get what we want. We will feel that God has forgotten us, and grow bitter because people around us will get the things that we have prayed for so long. If we put our hope in ourselves, we will be sadly disappointed. If we cannot rejoice in the blessings that God gives to others, and in the return of the lost and broken, then we miss out on who God is. We cannot understand God’s love for others if we do not know God’s love for us.

More than anything, God is calling us to see and to know that we are his children. He is our father, and he will run to invite us into the celebration. We have become sensitive about talking about God as our father, and I understand that. None of us have perfect fathers. Many of us have had father’s who hurt us more deeply than we can say. And that’s why Jesus is telling us what a father is meant to be like. In Jesus’ time, much like today, many fathers were known for being authoritarian, and using their power and legal control over their families. But that isn’t what Jesus says a father should be like. Jesus is reclaiming what it truly means to be a father. And of course, this kind of love and gentle pleading is not meant to be unique to fathers- it should apply to all of us: mothers, aunts, uncles, friends- it’s who God is.

We must let nothing get in the way of knowing that we are God’s children, and he is our father. Not our desire for riches and pleasure. Not our self-righteousness. Not our anger. Not our jealously. Not our judgement. Not our need to earn our place. Nothing.

It can be hard to believe it. Many of us feel like the younger son, and do not feel we deserve to be called God’s children. We feel we have done to much, or too little for God to every accept us as his children again.

Many of us feel like the older son, and resent that God seems to prioritise other, more sinful people above us. We are more concerned with earning God’s love than experiencing it. More concerned with getting what we want than celebrating the lost who God has found.

So, to all of us, God comes to us with open arms. “Come home.” He says, “you who are weary, come home! If you’re tired of your sin, or tired of trying to earn your place, come home! You are my child, and I love you. Come to me.”

Thanks be to God!