

## **SERMON: JESUS “THE REVELATION OF DIVINE LOVE”**

**A Sermon by Richard Clewell  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio**

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**TEXT: Luke 15: 11-32**

Our Gospel text this fourth Sunday in Lent is one of the most familiar parables which we have heard since we were children. It has inspired preachers for centuries and produced all sorts of speculation about these two sons and their characters, conflicts, and relationship to their father. History and tradition have come to entitle this story, “The Prodigal Son” and have created a breeding ground for sermons on these human relationships ad infinitum, ad nauseum. James Forbes, pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, tells of a preacher who gave a sixteen week sermon series on “The Prodigal Son,” and at the end of it a woman at the door said, “I am so sorry that that poor boy ever ran away from home.” I think we well understand what she meant.

Let us hear this reading this morning as a parable or word picture which treats us all the same way – it invites us in, turns us around in our conventional thinking, and sends us out with insight that hopefully makes a difference in our living. (Read Luke 15: 11-32). It is important to understand the context to which this series of parables responds. The Pharisees, the perceived elite of God’s chosen in purity and allegiance to the Scriptures, are criticizing Jesus for his close relationships with publicans and sinners. How could he possibly represent God’s way or concern when he associated, and even partied with such people?

This parable begins with these words, “A certain man had two sons - - -.” In this story the focus immediately is on the character of the father and his relationship to his sons. It is quite deceptive to let these sons dominate the narrative and lose sight of the primary point. It is a tale rooted in Israelite tradition with the reminiscences of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. Each of us can get caught up with the impulsive, rebellious younger son or identify with the hard-working, obedient elder son who apparently gets treated unfairly. Somehow this father can so easily be lost in the shuffle.

Perhaps we all have experience with or make judgments upon brothers or sisters who are willful, do their own thing, or take advantage of the situation, when we have attempted to do what’s right, to be loyal and to

obey without much affirmation or hoped-for reward. We get caught up in our own demands for fairness and fears that we might lose or be less valued.

Yet, if we get hung up here with the two sons, we miss the very point of the parable which Jesus presents. It’s not about the sons but about the father and his love

for both of them. It concerns not sibling rivalry, but the very character of their father which is unconditional love. It's not about "I will love you if you do this or I will love you if you don't do that," but rather "because of who you are and because of who I am, I must love you." "You are mine and belong to me." The father loves his children and is tied in the relationship unconditionally and inextricably. He may not approve of their ways, their behavior, or always find enjoyment with them, or even at times seek their company but he loves them. In fact, he loves them so much that he accepts them just as they are. Such love is hard to understand since neither son is particularly agreeable or likeable from a human point of view. The prodigal is impulsive, rebellious, indulgent, self-centered and foolish. He returns home only when he's "down and out" and sees no other alternative. The older brother is petty, jealous and spiteful, self-righteous, unimaginative, rather dull. Peter Gomes, Plummer professor of Christian Morals and Minister at Memorial Church, Harvard University, makes the following remark about this situation, "I think we should pity the poor father who has to live with this conspicuous vice and even more conspicuous virtue: perhaps he should have run away and left the place to the two of them to fight it out."

But, in fact, that is the point of the parable. The father didn't and we know he won't run away. It is not his character or nature as we see in the words and actions of his sons. The younger prodigal indicates his dad's character when at his lowest point in the midst of pain and degradation, when he finally fails at running his life in avoidance of the father, when he has blown everything so graciously given to him, states, "I will arise and go to my father." He recognizes the nature of his father and that there was always acceptance and that he would be there to receive him. He somehow knows that his father will love him no matter what which was demonstrated as his dad runs to receive him back with joy.

The older brother knows his father's nature as well – it's on the basis of paternal love and justice – he complains because he trusts his father's sense of justice. They both act on what they know about their father and what their truest inheritance is – the unconditional love of the father for his children.

This is the point of the parable and the very core of Jesus' message and the heart of the gospel: no one is too far gone or too bad to be removed from the unconditional love of God the Father. By the same token, no one is too good, too responsible, too self-righteous for the Lord to love. God loves all those to whom he has given life. We don't stop being his children no matter what circumstances occur. It is the confidence of the child in the love of his or her father that allows one to ask for forgiveness and restoration. Here Jesus does not talk about judgment, discipline, punishment, responsibility, or other parental responses. In our Christian experience, most of us have heard more than enough of such responses.

Here, Jesus focuses upon the nature of father's love which is there for us to claim even when we choose to ignore it or feel ignored by it. Theologian Helmut Thielecke

states that this story should not be called, “the Prodigal Son” but rather “the Waiting Father.” God waits for you and me to wake up, come to our senses, and to come home. I’m sure we can all identify with one or the other of these sons or daughters as the case may be. Among us there are probably the impulsive and rebellious who say, “Father, I’d rather do it myself.” There are probably others who think they can somehow earn God’s favor and live with the attitude of how lucky God is to have them. Whether you are a rebel, an outcast or a modern day Pharisee, God’s love for you is certain.

In this season of Lent as we struggle along not being sure of where we’re going in this life, we have the opportunity to come home to a waiting, loving Father. We have the opportunity in Christ for repentance (turning around) and renewal. Lent is a time to reflect and to accept the standing offer God has for you. God waits and loves, wishing no one to be destroyed or alienated. He is the One with constant and consistent love that beckons us home. Home, it is said, is where when you arrive they have to let you in.

The late William Sloane Coffin captured this well when he wrote, “Of God’s love we can say two things: it is poured out universally for everyone from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet and secondly, God’s love doesn’t seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. Our value is a gift, not an achievement.”

That truly is the character of God’s love revealed by Jesus in this powerful parable. May we, indeed, hear his compassionate call, “Come Home!”

Amen

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