

“God Is Here for You”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
July 28, 2019**

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 32:8-11

New Testament Lesson: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

I received an email on Monday from one of the family members worshipping with us online from Sedalia through our Sunday webcast. The subject line is titled, “An Open ‘Thank You’ Letter to the Church. The letter says:

Hello. After my visit to your church last Sunday I just had to take a minute to say thank you and God bless you!! Many of you went out of your way to not only welcome me, but to make me feel wanted and loved – I just don’t know any other way to put how I felt. Bob made me feel as if I’d attended the church for years. And the top-notch tour I got just blew my mind. You all have no idea just what your kindness meant to me. The last year has been very hard for me and my family and the years to come won’t be much better. The chance I’ve had to attend church via your live-streamed services each week has truly been a Godsend and a blessing. If anyone ever questions the need for your outreach ministry via your livestream, let me assure you that between Rev. Carlson and being able to attend church with you each week, you truly saved my life and brought me back to my faith in God and Jesus Christ. God bless you all and thank you so much!

Wow! Just wow. God is good; using us in such a way.

Today we are looking at the Parable of the Prodigal Son, a story of going away and coming home, of wrong directions and divine corrections, of hard times and hidden blessings. We can all relate to running away, heading in the wrong direction, hitting on hard times. And yet, it’s often difficult for us to discern God’s corrective Spirit, to imagine a home where we are always welcome no matter what we’ve done, to find and embrace those hidden blessings amid life’s hardest times.

So, let’s look at this parable given to us by Jesus, with the hope that we will find our way back whenever we’re lost and drifting in the wrong direction. There are lots of people heading in the wrong direction in this parable and the time leading up to it. First, we have the Pharisees and scribes, right? They criticize Jesus for welcoming “tax-collectors” and sinners. Tax collectors were fellow Jews working for the Roman Empire, taking advantage of their own people, which is also not a good direction to go in, right?

So Jesus tells them about a father and his two sons. Well, each of these family members has also headed in the wrong direction.

The younger son, for instance, asked his father for his inheritance ahead of time. This is like wishing your father dead, to his face. Not the right direction to go in. The father responds by dividing his property between his two sons, also maybe not the best decision. He gives half the money to the younger son to go off and have a good time.

It's like the young fellow who inherited \$250,000 from his uncle. The young man goes about living the life of his dreams, and in less than a year he's broke again. The guy's father hears of this and asks the young man, "What did you do with all that money?" "Well," the son confesses, "I spent \$60,000 on a new sports car, and \$20,000 taking my girlfriend to Tahiti. I went through \$75,000 on my weekend in Las Vegas, \$15,000 on a toga party for my frat house, and the remaining \$80,000, well I just foolishly squandered that."

Just like the younger son. The younger son goes off and has a good time, leaving the older son to work the family farm all alone, no help from his brother. The father, by dividing up of the money, ends up dividing his two sons. The older brother calls the younger – not "brother" – but "this son of yours," talking to his dad. For the older son, after what the younger one did, he no longer has a brother, not in his heart. And that, too, is not the right direction to go in.

Of course, after the younger son has squandered all his dad's money on food, alcohol and prostitutes in some far-off country, he finds himself in serious need, like never before. And herein lies the key to the parable. Sometimes we have to experience suffering before we're ready to receive the gift of a true and lasting blessing, a blessing that truly changes us for the better.

This is not to say that suffering is a good thing; it's not. God grieves our times of suffering, allowing them to happen only because of the sin that grips this world, sin that arises because of our free will, a free will that too often leads to misguided ways, opposing God's will.

That's what the younger son did, squandering the family fortune. Jesus tells us that "when he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout the country, and he began to be in need."

How often does our suffering come from not planning and preparing for those tough times to come? We allow ourselves to drift away from family and friends, from church and other support systems, just like the younger son who traveled to a distant country. And when true need hits, we have no one, just like the younger son.

The younger son, facing famine with not a cent to his name, hires himself out as a pig farmer, feeding the pigs. And all the while, he's so hungry, says Jesus, that this young man would eat anything – even pig food – "and no one gave him anything." Have you ever felt that way – nowhere to turn, no solution in sight? We all have.

And Jesus tells us that it's precisely those moments when we find God's arms held open to us in the widest possible way, just waiting for us to truly turn from our misguided ways and run to God's embrace. Or, as Jesus put it, the younger son "set off ... to his father" having confessed his sin and having turned from his misguided ways. And "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."

The son confesses to the father and the father is so overjoyed he throws a big celebration. In other words, God is ready to celebrate with you the blessing of turning toward God when you've gone astray or hit hard times. This is true for any of us when we're truly open to finding our way closer to God.

And it doesn't just have to be material things that lead us astray, things like drugs and alcohol, sexual promiscuity, fits of anger and violence (verbal or physical), lying and stealing, hoarding money that could otherwise bless someone else.

No, God is also there for us when we go in the wrong direction in our hearts, when we lose touch with a sense of grace and mercy for our fellow human beings, our brothers and sisters in Christ and throughout humanity. We see this desire of God to touch our hearts when we look at the story of the older son.

The older son was a good guy when it came to humble living in service to the father. But even good guys – and gals – good boys and girls can go in the wrong direction when life doesn't seem fair. The older son, when he feels the father is unfairly blessing his brother – throwing him a party – the older son allows his heart to harden. He says to his dad, "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!" You throw him a party.

Boy, can we relate to that. Life is not fair, is it? You work hard all your life just to see someone else cruising down easy street without a care in the world, and no concern for others. Or it's you left caring for your elderly parent while your siblings enjoy life in some far off place. Or you devote your time and talents and treasures to the church – to building up the kingdom of God – while the world around you goes to hell in a hand basket and no one seems to care, nothing anybody can do about it, so it seems.

And yet, what is worse – a good person whose heart is hardened and whose soul is turned to bitterness and despair, or recognizing that evil, misguided ways do exist and trusting God to make things right? As hard as it is for us, Jesus would suggest the latter – recognize that evil, misguided ways do exist, and trust God to make things right, perhaps even with your help, our help.

This parable is about drawing near to God, near to Jesus when we have turned in the wrong direction or allowed circumstances to harden our hearts. So ask yourself, is there something that has been weighing heavy on your heart – some limitation or deficiency in yourself, some action by somebody else, some trouble or struggle you've had to deal with? Think about it. Whatever is coming to mind for you right now, God is here for you.

For those who beat themselves up but can't manage to change their ways, for those who are lost and can't find their way forward, God is here for you, to guide you, here for you through prayer, through counsel with a pastor or therapist or friend, through God's own vision and strength that you might see and do the right thing. God is here for you.

No matter what your difficulty, no matter how far astray you've gone, no matter how alone you feel, God is here for you. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

As we enter into this time of prayer, O God, we offer our gratitude that you are always present to us. Instill in us a desire to listen to others.

Help us listen with open hearts and open minds, that people might feel safe in our presence. Instill in us a spirit of serenity that others might feel accepted in your nonjudgmental grace.

Free us from the tendency to label people and ideas, and allow us instead to lean into mercy and kindness.

In the stillness of these moments, we acknowledge the times when we have been less than kind, merciful and open.

Thank you for never driving us from your presence, loving God.

We pray your presence, also, with those in particular need this this day, and especially all those we continue to keep in prayer.

And Lord, let us be particularly mindful of your presence in our lives, in this place, at this time, as together we pray the prayer that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**