



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“The Unparalleled Parable”

Scripture Lesson: *Luke: 15:1-2, 11-32*

This sermon was preached by

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on June 18, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke: 15: 1-2

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15: 11-32

The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The 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. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ 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.

The Unparalleled Parable

The Gospel lesson for today is surely one of the most beloved in all of Christendom. We know the story so well and have heard it so often that it is difficult to say anything new or fresh with respect to it. Consequently, this parable from the lips of Jesus intimidates any preacher asked to deal with it. We know that we are not up to the task. Our words are inadequate. No sermon can do it justice.

The Church in the Western World has often referred to this story as the parable of the prodigal son but note that there are two sons here and we will not get to the second one until next week. It has been variously called the “World’s Greatest Short Story” and “the Gospel in Miniature.” George Murray speaks for me when he says that “it is the most divinely tender and the most humanly touching story ever told on earth.” I have labeled it simply “The Unparalleled Parable.”

In actuality this story is not primarily about the rebellious younger son or even his resentful older brother. It is rather a story about a loving father, about how he deals with his wayward children. As such, the story gives us an inspired insight into the character and the heart of our heavenly Father. This is the third of three stories told to self-righteous religious folk who were critical of Jesus because he associated with sinners and outcasts. In response, Jesus addresses their objections by telling the story of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and finally a couple of lost sons.

Let us begin where the story does with the younger son. The first thing we notice about this young man is the assertion of his self-will, his demand for freedom, for independence, his demand for his fair share of his father's wealth. You see, according to Jewish law a father was not free to leave his property as he wished. The oldest son, according to Deuteronomy, would get two-thirds of a father's property while a younger son would receive one-third. And so, upon the request of his younger son, the father in the story accedes to the request of the prodigal and decides to go ahead and distribute his property between his two sons. This was really not that unusual because fathers often disperse their estates before death, especially if they wished to retire from the actual management of the business affairs. There was no inheritance tax in those days so we can only assume that this was not an issue. In today's world he might well have chosen a life estate if he had a financial advisor.

At any rate, while the action taken by the young son may not have been that unusual, surely we can recognize that there was a certain callousness and a defiance in the son's request. It is as if he is saying, "Just go ahead and give me what I have coming to me by right and I'm out of here! Let me get out while the getting is good. The sooner you write me a check, the sooner I can be checking out!"

Of course, you know what the boy wants – freedom without restraint. Maybe he viewed life on the farm, life under the loving rule of his father, as oppressive and boring. Maybe the tediousness of his dull older brother or the continuing oversight of his father, which he surely interpreted as meddling, was just too much to stand. Life out there was beckoning him – a life away from the disciplines of home and the watchful eye of his father. He had a dream and he must pursue it – a dream of a life where he could do what he wanted, when he wanted, as he wanted, without having to answer to anyone. He was fed up with moral, financial, and family restraints.

Now let's be honest. Have you never had such dreams yourself ... especially when you were young? These dreams are not restricted to adolescents. Sometimes in our idle moments, we imagine ourselves as having enough power, enough money, enough influence, or enough plain old gumption just to strike off and do what we darn well please without having to answer to anyone.

A woman comes home from work one evening and her husband is packing his suitcase. "What's going on?" she asks. "I've just won the PowerBall Lottery," he says. Excitedly she asks, "Where are we going?" And he replies, "We? I'm out of here!"

The dream of independence and self-sufficiency is popular enough, but it is also a cruel illusion. And the fortunate ones are those who, like this younger son, live long enough to realize the difference between fantasy and fact. The fortunate ones are those who by the grace of God come to see that there really is no such thing as freedom without restraint. There is no such thing as having your way all of the time. And there is no place that will afford you joy and fulfillment apart from responsibility and accountability. It matters little whether you are rich or poor, strong or weak, young or old.

One day Lucy, in the "Peanuts" comic strip, is reading to her little brother Linus out of a storybook: "And so the king was granted his wish ... everything he touched would turn to gold! Now the next day ... "Quickly Linus interrupts Lucy: Stop! You don't have to read any further! I know just what's going to happen. These things always seem to have a way of backfiring!!"

Little Linus is right, of course. All those illusory dreams do seem to have a way of backfiring! And the tragedy is not just that our dreams do not always work out perfectly, as we had hoped, but rather that we never come to the point where we realize that this is the case.

So the father in the story grants his son's request. And it is not surprising that within a few days the boy turns his portion of the property into cold, hard cash and strikes off for the far country – as far as possible from the hated restraints of home.

Does it seem odd to you that the father makes no attempt to restrain his son? And yet, this is part of the wonder of this story and part of the strength of the father's love. Home would not be home to a boy of alien will, to a boy whose mind and heart were elsewhere. So sadly, no doubt, and tearfully, I am sure, he watches his son pack his bags and walk out the door and head off to God only knew where. But apparently, God did know!

What we see in the person of the younger son is humanity's ageless attempt to find itself, to establish its own identity, to achieve adulthood and even independence. The young man was apparently at that age when a person had to determine for himself what direction the course of his life would take. No one can make that decision for anyone else. And the father, realizing this, rightfully but painfully steps aside. You see, the one who loves the most is the one who is strong enough to let go and who realizes that a love that is forced or required is a poor substitute for the real thing.

Well, the son arrives finally in his utopia with money in hand and with moral and family restraints far behind him. He has nothing to do but to enjoy himself in whatever fashion he pleases. And so, there in the far country he whirls through the happy days and the sparkling nights surrounded, no doubt, by all those jovial companions who are more than willing to befriend a boy with money in his pocket and in search of a good time. Soon, however, the bubble bursts. Or as Linus might say, "The whole thing backfires!" The young boy's reckless living enables him soon to spend every bit of the money he had acquired such a short time before. And one morning he wakes up only to find himself physically and spiritually and financially destitute. I suspect that his newfound friends were strangely absent too. The boy has only one unpleasant, distasteful alternative – to find a job! This was not at all what he had anticipated when he left home.

Do you see the irony in the kind of job that he finally secures? The only job he can find is serving as hired help on a pig farm, not exactly the kind of job a nice young Jewish boy aspires to. This job would have to be the last available. Those in Jesus' Jewish audience would know the degradation of the prodigal's work because pigs are considered the lowest, the most repulsive animals on earth. As he goes about his task he may even recall that Jewish proverb: "Cursed is he who feeds swine."

What's the worse job you've ever had? Last year ABC News did a piece on distasteful lines of work in our day. One Betty Lyon has worked for 35 years as an odor judge. She works for Hilltop Labs in Cincinnati and she spends her days sniffing armpits. In addition to armpits, Betty Lyon uses her super sniffer to smell diapers, cat litter, and other consumer products. I don't know what the going rate for an odor judge is, but having spent 35 years in this position I suspect she is highly compensated!

Not so for the young man in the far country. He is destitute. His supposed blessing has become a curse, his freedom has become bondage. It is a rather strange turn of events, is it not? In his father's house he had freedom. He was free to go or to stay. But in the far country notice the change which is reflected in the language Jesus uses to tell the story. His employers send him into the field. This is no request. It is an order. The prodigal has no choice whatsoever in the matter. And one lesson the boy is learning in the far country is that while he is free to sin, to do his own in his own way, he is not free to escape the consequences of his sins. More often than not, the undisciplined person, the rebel who resists all authority, the person who refuse to abide by any precepts or restraints, eventually turns inwardly upon himself and becomes the victim of his own folly.

There in the far country for the prodigal son the primeval lie comes home to roost, the lie that promises freedom without responsibility, pleasure without accountability. His chosen and carefree life of doing as he pleased led him not to an anticipated utopia, but rather to bondage in a pigsty. And when he came face to face with his adversary he was looking at his own reflection in a puddle in a pigsty.

Nevertheless, by the grace of God and that alone, a curious thing happens in the pigsty in the far country. Call it conversion if you wish, a compelling phrase and the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible says that the young man "came to himself." Some people never come to themselves in life and consequently they never come to their heavenly Father.

Regrettably, for some people it takes pigsties or pain or illness or bankruptcy or humiliation to bring a person to his or her senses and to enable that person to recognize, not only his or her own sin and depravity but also their very great need of God. Too many people will simply never accept their need for God so long as they can possibly cling to anything else – to their intelligence, to their strength, to their professional standing, to their education, to their family, to their beauty, to their wealth, or to their pleasure. Consequently they will never look up to God until they have reached the very depths of life. When a person finally realizes that there is nowhere else to turn but to God then they will recognize their own limitations and inability to save themselves and perhaps then they can see the outstretched, nailed-pierced hands of God reaching for them.

In the far country the prodigal is brought face to face with his own folly and sin. He admits that he has sinned against heaven and against his own father. And he decides to return to his true home and to plead for his father's mercy, for he would rather be a slave in his father's house than a free man in a pigsty. Isn't that interesting? Later the Apostle Paul would argue that our true freedom is to be found only when we become slaves to Christ.

Of course, it is never an easy thing for a person to acknowledge his mistakes, to confess her sin, to admit the wrong that has been done and the need for forgiveness. But confession and repentance, turning away from self-reliance and self-interest and turning toward God and his mercy is the only manner in which we will ever find our way back into the Father's home. It may be painful for the moment. And so it must have been for the prodigal, but it is a pain that is quickly forgotten when the word of pardon is heard.

The reason the pain of confession is so quickly forgotten is not because our sin is either trivial or unimportant, but rather because the God from whom we are seeking forgiveness is so ready and eager

to welcome his wayward children back home so that he can shower his blessings upon them.

Consider the father in the parable. His son has rehearsed the speech he is going to use as his confession. He is going to beg for mercy and ask to be restored, not as a son, but as a hired hand on the family place. We can imagine him going over his speech again and again as he winds his way back home. But he is never given the chance to give his speech. The father is so filled with joy and compassion at the sight of his returning son that he runs out and interrupts the son's confession in mid-sentence and commands one of the servants to quickly bring the best robe.

In my mind's eye I can see the reunion taking place. I imagine the father looking out over the fields every day hoping to see a familiar sight, hoping to see a stranger with a familiar gait in his walk. And I imagine him spotting one day a lone figure making his way down the road. He stares with increasing intensity and notices the rags on the person's back and the disheveled beard and the bedraggled figure slowly approaching. There is something familiar in the swing of his steps, something special about the lines of his body. Every feature, no doubt, had been treasured in his memory, pondered and wept over many times during those years of absence. "Why, that looks like ... If I didn't know better I would swear ... That's my boy! My boy is back home!" And he races out of the house and down the road and grabs his son in a bear hug of an embrace and kisses him as only a parent can.

Kenneth Bailey says that we should take particular note of the fact that the father ran to meet the son. He says that in Biblical times men did not run. It was not considered a dignified thing to do. Even today, can you imagine President Biden running and leaping across the White House lawn to hug and welcome some foreign dignitary? Of course not. The President may be glad to see his guest but running to welcome him is definitely out of the question. And yet, that is what this father does in the parable and it is a portrait of God's eagerness to receive and bless his child.

"Quickly, bring the best robe" – for all the wounds of the far country must be covered. "Quickly, a ring for his finger" – the token of authority. "And yes, shoes for his feet" – for slaves could go barefoot but a son must be shod as befits the family honor. There would be nothing but the best here. "Kill the fattened calf." We're having a barbecue." And why? "For this my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found!" So why do you suppose Jesus goes out of his way to befriend sinners and outcasts?

Our heavenly Father, like the father in the parable is so anxious to forgive us, to restore us, and to welcome us home. He longs for a loving relationship with us once again. Notice that here is no sharp word of reproof, no making sure that there was a sufficient sense of guilt, no requirement of a time of probation. Had it been me I am afraid I would have said, "Okay, you're home, but you're grounded for the next six years and you have to do all the yard work." But no, there is nothing but the fullness of a father's love here.

What an unparalleled parable this is. Here is a story told in the first century but applicable in the twenty-first. It was meant for children like you and me as well. The love and forgiveness this prodigal discovered is available to every prodigal here today. Like the young son, we often turn our backs on God and go our separate and defiant ways. Like him, we get our priorities all mixed up and begin to love rather than use things, and we begin to use rather than love people. Like him, we steer our lives according to what we think is best for us rather than according to what God says is best for us. Defiantly and sinfully we rely on ourselves and on our own abilities and discover before too very long

that we have become our own victims. We have made little gods of ourselves and we have become their slaves.

But the good news of the Gospel for you and me and for any prodigal with ears to hear and eyes to see is that if we willingly acknowledge our sinfulness and turn from it and return to our God, we too will find our heavenly Father standing on tiptoe hoping to see us and then running with arms outstretched to welcome us home. We are his children. Would he dare refuse us?

When all our clever sciences have been forgotten, when all other stories have slipped into oblivion, this story will still be fresh. For it has the power to untangle our raveled lives and bring us back to our heart's true home.

Heavenly Father, often we find ourselves running away from home, turning our backs on you, and wandering around in life exhausting ourselves on meaningless pursuits or empty thrills. We get so carried away by imagination, by all those dreams that look so good and promise of much, but inevitably leave us bankrupt and bereft. We thank you today for the second chance, for loving us so much that you are willing to forgive us and even to restore us as your very own children. We praise you for your mercy and we promise to start out anew, forgetting the past and living to serve you in the present, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*The above sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.