



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 13, 2013

"Parable of the Waiting Father (Part 1)"

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

This parable is so central to understanding the Christian faith. It is key to knowing the character of God. If you really want to know what God is like, this is it.

It is known as the parable of the prodigal son. We will see that it is actually a story that involves TWO prodigal sons, not one. But we will only look at one son this week and the other son next week.

But the parable is really about a father who loves unconditionally, who is long-suffering, patient, and kind. It is a story of our Heavenly Father. This is really the parable of the waiting father.

Luke 15:11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons.

Luke 15:12 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.

Luke 15:13 A 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.

Luke 15:14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.

Luke 15:15 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.

Luke 15:16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

Luke 15:17 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!

Luke 15:18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;

Luke 15:19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'"

Luke 15:20 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.

Luke 15:21 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.'

Luke 15:22 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.

Luke 15:23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;

Luke 15:24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

Let me give some cultural context to the story so we can have a deeper understanding of what Jesus is talking about. If a family has two sons, the tradition states that the father is to give one-third of his estate to the younger and two-thirds to the older. This would happen at death or possibly during the lifetime of the father only if the father initiates it.

So the fact that the younger son arrogantly pushed for and insisted for his inheritance was a humongous taboo. It was tantamount to him telling his father, "I wish you were dead," or, "I can't wait for you to die so give my inheritance to me now."

Graciously, this loving father gives his son his share of the inheritance, the freedom to leave home and to make his own choices.

The son apparently decides to leave his Jewish homeland as he ends up in an area where pigs are raised, which is not an animal Jews eat.

He also decides to leave the tradition and custom of his Jewish heritage and parties up on the wild side.

So at this point, we see that the son is not only arrogant but is also incredibly offensive. He told his father that he can't wait for him to die so he wants his money now. The son didn't want a relationship with the father; he just wants his stuff. He rejects the homeland where he was nurtured, he does away with the values that hold a healthy community together, and he squanders quickly all of his inheritance that was given him.

If they had cars back then, the bumper sticker on his car when he drove away would've said: "Party, party, party! Live for the now!"

But then a famine comes. The son is now broke; bankrupt both monetarily and emotionally. He gets the low-paying, low-esteemed job of feeding pigs, which are being fed better food than he is. The son is so down and out. No one is giving him a handout. His father's servants eat better than he.

So he wakes up one day and says, "I have to go home. No matter how embarrassing that is, I have to go home. And I will tell my father, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to even be called your son. Treat me like a hired hand. I want to come home.'"

Let's stop here.

As I said last week, one of the great challenges we have in life is to be humble, truly humble, where we know in our hearts that we are lost without God. In telling this parable, Jesus is saying that this

arrogant son—who has done so much wrong and who has committed so many sins—is the kind of person whom God loves, too. How can this be? This son is a jerk of the highest level.

Jesus says that God loves people who know they are weak, who know they have done wrong, who know they have sinned—people who have thoroughly blown it.

This is the essence of what a Christian community is about; not cool, ethically clean people. A church is like a group of losers, people who know they are far from perfect, who know that in many ways they have sinned against heaven and before God.

People often say to me, "I can't come to church. I am not good enough." The paradox is if you really think you are not good enough, then that is exactly the admission ticket you need to come to church. Church is for those who think they are not good enough.

How does God respond to one who has deeply sinned, deeply done wrong, been deeply foolish, been terribly hurtful, rude and wasteful in life and yet who wants to come to God and be found?

Jesus says to the people listening to Him that day: here is what God is like. He's like the father in the parable.

In the parable, when the son is heading home and while still far off in the distance, his father sees him. It appears the father was waiting because the Bible says he saw him in the distance, hoping that one day his son would return, and then he sees him!

Filled with compassion, the father starts running down the road to meet his son. A distinguished father of great stature does not run. It is not becoming. He is after all the patriarch, and in the Jewish culture patriarchs don't even walk quickly, let alone run.

But here is the father dashing down the dusty road with his robes flying in the air. His servants must have taken off after him wondering, "What is going on?"

The father doesn't care if he looks foolish. He runs because he is so full of joy. And when he gets to his son, he hugs and kisses him. He is so happy his son is back after waiting for all of those months or years.

The son immediately goes into his repentant talk, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

He means it. It's from his heart. He knows he has disgraced and dishonored his father. He knows that, according to the Law, he could be stoned for his disobedience.

And how does the father respond? First, he hugs him. His hug is like a protective shield that says, "No one touch my boy. He's my son."

The son is about to say "I am willing to be one of your servants." But the father cuts him off and calls out to his slaves by saying, "Bring out the best robe you can find and put it on my son."

Who has the best robe? The father. He gives up one of his own robes to cover the nakedness and dirtiness of his son. The robe signifies honor.

Yes, this son would not be held in low honor but in high honor.

Then the servants are told to put on his son's finger a ring, which would signify that his son would now have Inheritance again and authority in the family. And then the father said to put sandals on his feet to signify that he would once again have prestige.

All three objects signify freedom and wealth in the Jewish culture. And then on top of that, the father says, "We are going to celebrate big time. We will kill the best calf, the fatted calf. We will eat and celebrate! Why? For this son of mine was dead and is now alive again. He was lost and is now found! Mazel tov!"

This is the essence of our faith: no matter how much wrong we have done, no matter how much we have been unfaithful to God, even if we have been offensive to Him, even though we have been sinful, immoral, degenerate, unethical, down right strange, or abnormal, like a loving and waiting father, God will still accept us. And more than just accept us, He will give us a blessing and restore us to being the most valued, honored son or daughter He has. He is that forgiving!

This is mind-boggling! God puts His robe on us, gives us His ring for our finger and sandals for our feet, and then kills the fatted calf and throws the biggest party in our honor when we say to him, "I want to be come back to you to be your child, to be in Your fold."

This is such good news! We follow God because we are blown away by His grace. He has done so much for us! He has forgiven so much in our lives. It is this love that

builds our self-esteem. Others may hate us, others may not appreciate us, others may not thank us enough, but the basics—the foundation of our self-esteem—is that God the heavenly Father loves us.

The turning point for the prodigal son can be found in Luke 15:17. There is this little phrase about the son; don't miss it. It's a killer line. Right there in verse 17.

Luke 15:17 "But when he came to himself..."

It is when the son came to himself that he realized he was dying of hunger. It is when he came to himself that he realized he was lost without a relationship with his father.

It is when he came to his senses that he said, "I will say to my father, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.'"

It is when he came to himself that he said, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

There comes a point when we realize that in our relationship with God the Father, we just really wanted his stuff, things he may give us, but not a relationship with him. We want His blessings but not Him. We obey God not to get God but to get things. We obey God not to know Him as father but that maybe He will make us happy by giving us stuff or perhaps by blessing our business.

But get this; if you pursue happiness in this life, you will be thwarted. Not my idea. It's the idea of Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist who was imprisoned in a Jewish

concentration camp during World War II.

The January 9, 2013th issue of The Atlantic magazine website (<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/theres-more-to-life-than-being-happy/266805/#.UO-qnshYqfw.email>) has an article called There's More to Life than Being Happy. The premise is that we should not seek a happy life but a meaningful life, a life to live for, a life that is expecting something from us.

The article by Emily Esfahani Smith quotes Victor Frankl, the author of the famous multi-million selling book *Man's Search For Meaning* (voted as one of the most influential books in the U.S.), who says, "To the European, it is a characteristic of the American culture that again and again one is commanded and ordered to be happy. But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue, one must have a reason to be happy."

When Frankl says *ensue*, he means by seeking meaning in life, happiness will come or result out of that pursuit of a meaningful life. But if you just look for happiness, you will not find it.

According to a new study that will be published sometimes this year in an issue of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, those who desire to live a meaningful life are seen as givers, and those who just want to lead a happy life are takers.

The authors write: "Happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desire are easily satisfied and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided....Partly what we do as human beings is to take care of others and contribute to others.

This makes life meaningful but it does not necessarily make us happy.” (from *Some Key Differences Between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life* by Roy Baumeister, Kathleen Vohs, Jennifer Aaker, and Emily Garbinsky)

You see, happiness means it is all about us feeling good. But feelings come and go; they fade away. But a meaningful life drives you, sustains you through the good and bad times. And because it is worth it, it’s enduring. Christ-followers should be living meaningful lives, and not just pursuing happiness.

The prodigal son is all about happiness. He just wanted to find happiness and so he sought out a life of spending and partying and wasted it all.

There comes a time for all of us when there has got to be something more than just wanting happiness. There must be a cause for which we would even sacrifice happiness to give something of ourselves on behalf of the common good.

There comes a time when we stop using God, but really want know Him and follow Him. There comes a time for all of us when we come to ourselves and realize that “I am far, far from perfect. I really don’t love very well. I don’t feel loved very much. I have hurt so many people. I have been self-centered. I’m either ignorant of or have ignoring God, or I have been using God just to get ahead in life rather than to know God Himself.”

There is a moment in time when we come to ourselves and say, “I want to come back to the Father for I am the prodigal son. I am the

prodigal daughter. Lord, forgive me for I have sinned against you.

“I want to be known by God the Father and experience the abundance of His love; this God who would totally forgive me, hug me, guide me, put His ring on my finger, his robe around me, and His sandals so I can walk with Him always.

“I want to accept Him fully and truly as my Heavenly Father, who has sent His Son to us. I want to accept this Jesus, God who has come to earth, as my Lord, my real savior and friend, the most brilliant loving one I could ever know.

“I want to accept Him fully in my life. I have come to my senses and realize I need Jesus in my life. I don’t want just happiness...I want meaning. Give me Jesus.”

If that is your desire today, I am going to lead us in a prayer right now. “please join me. (Pastor Dan says a prayer.)

If you said that prayer, I am going to ask you to come down during this next song, to come here in the front and meet me. I want to say a blessing over you and others on the prayer team will meet with you and also pray with you.

By you coming here forward, it is symbolic like the prodigal son walking down the road to the father to say with all of our hearts and body “I am coming home to God. I want to be with Him and experience His love and I am dedicating my life to Him.”

So please come forward if you have said that prayer and are dedicating or rededicating your life.

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