

THE OVERLOOKED ONE

Luke 15:11-32

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Only a few days ago I heard the Luke 15 story read this morning as our text. However, it was not in the King James Version, or the New International Version, or the more contemporary rendering known as *“The Message.”* Actually, it was so contemporary and so up-to-date that it was being spoken in today’s English. A middle age daughter who stayed in the hometown of her parents and provided a lot of the day-to-day care for her widowed mother was talking about an older brother who had moved away decades ago and returned home for an occasional visit. *“You know how it is when he comes home,”* she said, *“Momma has a big dinner, she kills the fatted calf, the prodigal has come home!”* There was more than just a trace of anger and a tinge of resentment in her voice as she told her version of the parable of the prodigal son.

Maybe we have our own rendering of Luke 15 to tell. Many of us surely do. Few of us grew up as the older child or the younger child without feeling that somehow the other somehow had it better. There exists for so many of us a very subtle resentment of the more favored sibling. Typically, older children grow up under a greater weight of parental expectations. Parents of first children are often a bit up tight and demanding. With the children who follow there is usually a relaxing of some of those expectations which certainly is noticed by the older child. Parents are not quite as up tight after learning that kids aren’t broken as easily as first thought. So, first children normally see themselves as never getting away with anything while the younger gets away with everything. And, of course, the younger often grows up certain that the oldest is the favored child. It is a wonder that any of us make it to something akin to normal adulthood and that our children turn out as good as they do. Maybe there is more grace in these family dynamics than ever we thought.

But, what is interesting is that as we encounter the parable of the prodigal son, we immediately find ourselves identifying with one of these two sons. Some of us see ourselves as the child who got lost for a bit and some of us see ourselves as always being around doing the right thing. A priest wrote of his spiritual encounter with the parable by writing, *“...I lived a quite dutiful life. When I was six years of age, I had already wanted to become a priest and never changed my mind. I was born, baptized, confirmed and ordained in the same church and had always been obedient to my parents, my teachers, my bishops, and my God. I had never run away from home, never wasted my time and money on sensual pursuits, and had never gotten lost in ‘debauchery and drunkenness’.”* For my entire life I had been quite responsible, traditional, and homebound.” Some of us can identify with what he wrote and some of us would not, but what is truly interesting is the way we almost always find ourselves reading the parable and identifying with one son or the other. There is an ego centric part of us that always takes us to that place. We live in this culture which proclaims, “It is all about me,” and though this self centered

lens we read the parable. In reality the parable was not spoken by Jesus so that we could identify with one son or the other, but so that we could see a picture of our heavenly Father. We read the parable and make the father the incidental person in the story instead of its central character.

In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen spoke about a Rembrandt painting depicting the story by writing, “*Instead of being called ‘The Return of the Prodigal Son,’ it could easily have been called, ‘The Welcome by the Compassionate Father.’*” The emphasis is less on the son than the father. The parable is in truth a “*Parable of the Father’s Love.*” At the heart of the parable we find those words about the Father. In verse 20 the text tells us about the father’s response to the waywardness of the youngest son,

*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.*

In verse 28 the text tells us about the father’s response to the anger of the oldest son,

*His father came out and began to plead with
him.*

How strange that the most important One of the parable and His actions are hardly seen at all by those of us who read it unable to see anything but ourselves. How strange we read the parable and can only look at one of the sons and say, “That’s me!” without first saying, “There is God. Look how He loves me.” Too often we are so pre-occupied with seeing ourselves that we miss the most important part of the parable.

More than we need to see ourselves in the parable, we need to see this picture of God our Father. It is not a passive Father God revealed to us in this parable, but One who, out of His great compassion, intentionally goes to us. To the younger son, He ran. To the younger son loving affection is given. To the oldest son, the Father also intentionally goes. To the oldest son, no ultimatums or demands are offered. There is only a heart pleading for him to return to the place where he belongs. If we want to see God, if we want to catch a glimpse of His heart, if we want to see how much He loves each one of us, there is no better place for us to go than to the picture of the Father painted with the words of this parable of Jesus.

At its core it tells us important things about the nature of God and how He relates to us. Whenever we go through times where we deny Him, or ignore Him, or live as if He has no place in our life, He waits and looks for us. He never gives up on us. No matter how deeply we might wade in the mire of sin, He does not give up on us. He does not stop looking for our return. In Romans 5:8 it is written,

*But God proves His love for us in that while
we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

Not too long ago we saw these black billboards along the roadway which had a straight-forward simple word like “*What part of ‘thou shalt not’ ...didn’t you understand?*”

Another one said, *“Keep using my name in vain. I’ll make rush hour longer.”* At the bottom corner of the billboard was written, *“God.”* The cross is a plain, simple, straightforward word about how much each one of us is loved by God. The theology of this word from Romans is just that simple and straightforward. It is God’s Word to us. Regardless of our wild living or our sulking resentment that life has not been better, we are still loved by God. The Father painted in the parable helps us see what it looks like to be so loved by God that He will seek us with a compassionate heart and an untiring spirit.

Our Father God does not want a single one of us to live outside the security He has provided for us. His heart is broken when our disobedience takes us to a different place, but He never stops looking for us and pleading with us to return. A story about the prodigal son tells of an old friend who visits this father who son has gone to throw his life away. He tells the old man all the things he has heard about his son. And then, he says to him, “If he were my son, I would let him go.” The heart-broken father replied, “Ah, but he is not your son. He is my son.” We can run, but there is no place to hide. We can spit in His face but it will not change His countenance as He looks upon us. We can curse Him declaring we want nothing to do with Him, but His hand will be still be extended to us. You see, there is nothing we can do which can separate us from the love God has for us. The one thing God will never cease doing is loving us.

He loves us because He desires the best for us. He desires for us to know what it is to live this life free of the guilt of wrong choices, free from the despair of living unforgiven, and free from the hopelessness of thinking that this life is all there is. It is not that we deserve any of this. It is all about His grace. It is all about what He would give to us because He loves us. The prodigal son who returned home was offered this love and he rejoiced in it. The older son who sulked outside in anger was also offered this love, but he would not accept it. What in the world will you and I do in this very moment as this same love is being offered to each one of us here?

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on March 14, 2010.