

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 4th Sunday of Lent, March 6, 2016

Forward Momentum: The Loving Father

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Today's reading from Luke is one of the best known passages in all of scripture, the story of a wayward son, his return to the awaiting arms of his father, and the reaction of the older son to his brother's return. The story is generally called the Parable of the Prodigal Son but that name is one I don't care for. I prefer the title of the Parable of the Loving Father as it is referred to in some Bible translations.

When I mentioned to Betsy that my sermon topic this morning was this particular passage from Luke, she reminded me of a bit of sibling jealousy in our family some years ago. Our oldest son remained at home while he attended West Virginia University where I was a professor. Unfortunately in his eyes he had to take one of the courses I taught, but that is another story.

Our second son opted to attend Michigan State University which was a long way from our home in West Virginia. He wanted to get away from home for awhile. As a result we did not see him very much until he came home for summer vacations.

One time when he did come home our daughter made a large banner welcoming him home and his older brother just skulked around the house in a pout. He finally asked what the big deal was that his brother was coming home after a long absence --- sibling rivalry and jealousy.

That is what our parable is about today, jealousy and sibling rivalry. The younger brother had left, had done wrong, but when he returned home, the father welcomed him home with open arms and threw a party. The older brother was extremely upset and jealous, but that is not the point of the parable. The real meaning of the parable lies in the love of the father for his two sons, the wayward one and the faithful one --- love for his children, boundless love, for each of them no matter what they had done.

To better understand the parable it helps to know that in the Jewish culture of the time, an inheritance normally was not distributed until the father's death. Asking for it earlier was a grave insult. It was like saying, "Father, I wish you were dead."

The Mishnah allowed for a father to divide his property before death but the right to dispose of it did not go to his heirs until his death. The father retained control of the property until he died.

Thus it was extraordinary that the father acceded to the younger son's demands giving him the property which in turn was squandered. The younger son had no further claim on the inheritance while the older son's inheritance remained in the father's control.

When the younger son came to his senses he said to his father, who welcomed him home, *"I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."*

"I have sinned against heaven" meant that he had sinned against God. Jews referred to heaven as a way to avoid using the name of God.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

"He ran to his son." That would never happen back then. A patriarch of those times would never run. He would walk in a dignified, slow manner. It would have been considered to be degrading and humiliating for him to have run.

Again by the culture of the times, the older son should have been the one to reconcile the father to the errant sibling, but he didn't. He even refused to attend the banquet, another great insult to the father. He even dishonored the father by confronting him in front of others. He didn't even show respect for his father by addressing him as "my father" or "sir" as the culture would also have expected him to do.

Both sons showed lack of respect for the father, both sinned against him and insulted him, but the father loved his sons so much that he forgave them and extended open arms to them.

Do you see the real story here --- the forward momentum toward Easter and the resurrection? Forgiven sinners, you and I, having our sins forgiven and being welcomed into the open arms of our God, our Father?

An article in Presbyterian Outlook by Cynthia Rigby (March 31, 2014) on our scripture reading was entitled "Prodigal Cross." It began, "*The idea that the Son had to die so that the Father would be able to forgive us has never made much sense to me. If God loves us no matter what, why can't God just go ahead and forgive us?*" That is a question most, if not all of us, have probably asked.

She answers her own question in part by commenting on the actions of the two sons and saying, "*This is where the cross is ... in the parable. It is in the father holding nothing back from his sons. It is in the father being demeaned for the sake of these two particular beloved ones. And maybe most of all it is in the father not even considering that he might be making a sacrifice. As it says in Hebrews 12:2, Jesus 'for the joy set before him ... endured the cross, scorning its shame...' That seems to be the father to a T.*" (Note: The Bible quote was rephrased using the NIV translation).

"... The God of our imagination waits patiently for us to run to him, ever ready to receive, ever ready to bless. But this God is too foggy, too distant, too predictable, too respectable. The God we see in Luke 15, by contrast, is the God we know in Jesus Christ. This God cannot wait to receive us, and so comes running toward us ... God runs out to the pathway to meet the younger son; God runs out of the party in search of the elder ... I propose [that] the cross begins with God's exhilarated, joyous, ungodly running to meet and find us. And I think it continues with a running toward us that keeps on and keeps on even when we pull our hands back, even when we deny and wish dead; even when we crucify."

We are the prodigal sons and daughters. Our heavenly Father is waiting to run to us with open arms. In this Lenten season may we have the forward momentum to run to receive the God who never stops running to meet us.

Amen.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011