

***“Summer Shorts, Vol. 2: Let It Go”***

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**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**

**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**July 15, 2018**

**Introduction:**

Every page of the Bible has two sides: Comfort and challenge. It is the very nature of the gospel to provide us the comforting good news of God’s great mercy and steadfast love all the while challenging us to respond to God’s mercy and steadfast love with our very lives; by learning it, sharing it, living lives shaped by it. They are like opposite sides of the same page. On one side we read comfort, but then we flip the page and find the challenge. So, for the remainder of July, as we are gathered together in one place to worship, we will do exactly that. We will revisit some of the Bible’s most familiar stories and look at both sides of the page, exploring how we are comforted by them and challenged by them. I will attempt to do it on one literally page, front and back, comfort and challenge; challenge and comfort. (*Note: for purposes of this distribution manuscript, this single sheet format will not be maintained.*)

This week: the parable of “The Prodigal Son.”

**Scripture Reading: Luke 15:11-32**

<sup>11</sup>Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>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! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>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.’ <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup>“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”



**Sermon: "Summer Shorts, Vol. 2: Let It Go"**

**The Prodigal Son** is another of those familiar Bible stories that has earned a place in our cultural lexicon. Whenever a person we haven't seen in a while comes home, somebody's almost always going to say "The prodigal has returned." It's actually a pretty common trope in movies and TV. And the story itself is a common subject in art and music. Popular bands from The Osmonds to The Rolling Stones have recorded songs based on the story of the Prodigal Son.

As comforting stories go, it's the top of the list. A son walks away from his father and essentially wastes his life, but the father welcomes him home with open arms. There's mercy, love, forgiveness, compassion; there's probably no story that better encompasses the depth and breadth of God's care and concern for us than this one.

And that is even more clear when you look at what the son has really done. He demands his portion of his father's inheritance and goes out into the world to live high off the hog; an ironic turn of phrase since his eventual fall from grace leads him to the lowest position imaginable for a Jewish man of the time, feeding and cleaning-up after hogs.

But even before he starts throwing away his money on a fast living, hard partying, "sleep when I'm dead" lifestyle, the younger son has irreparably damaged his relationship with his father. By asking for his share of his father's property, he is essentially declaring that his father is already dead. Not only that, but his inheritance would have been, at least in part, land; and to spend the way he did, means he had to have sold that land, something not done lightly in those days. If you sold your family land it was because you were desperate for money; not because you needed cash for the casinos.

And did your parents ever look at you with disappointment and say, "We didn't raise you like that?" Well, after disrespecting his father, his family, and his community, this younger son went off and lived a life completely contrary to what he had been taught.

He didn't burn his bridges, he firebombed every one of those suckers and made sure there was no way back. Until one day he realizes that he has hit rock bottom. And his only hope is to go back; to try to pick through the wreckage of what he himself has wrought and beg to be taken back as a slave.

As you read you can see that forgiveness isn't even part of the equation. He doesn't expect anything so grand as to be forgiven. All he hopes is to be given a chance to serve as a slave; then he would at least be assured of having food to eat and a safe place to sleep at night. He knows he deserves to be punished for what he's done and he's willing to accept that. Forgiveness is the farthest thing from his mind and rightfully so.

But the father has different ideas. He loves his son, you see. He wants him to come home. He knows home is where the younger son will find solid examples to help him learn to be a man of God. He knows home is where he will find respect for life and an opportunity to live a joyful life. The father loves his son and his son's mistakes, no matter how hurtful and grave, do not change that one basic fact.

Because of that he still wants what's best for his son. And that is coming home. So when the son returns, the father runs out to meet him. And men of that time didn't run, they walked. Running was undignified. Running meant hiking up your robes and showing your nakedness to the world. Real men don't do that. But fathers who want only to embrace a son who was lost and now found, well they sure do.

And that is the good news of this parable. There is no place we can go, no sin we can commit, no hurt we can perform that will make God stop loving us or that will keep God from embracing us and welcoming us home.



**When we hear** the story of the prodigal, it's easy to put ourselves in the place of the younger son. Who among us hasn't done something to hurt someone we love and then long to be forgiven; to be given a second chance? And seeing the father as God who welcomes back the long-lost sinner is pretty easy, too. The church has built so much doctrine and teaching on that very notion. Old hymns like "Amazing Grace" and "Just as I Am" express that gratitude to God for loving us and redeeming us in spite of our lives of sins.

Truth be told, more often than we would care to admit, we should probably be reading this story from the perspective of the older brother. Remember him? The dutiful son who stayed home and worked for his father; who showed proper respect and did everything the right way? Remember him? The one who disapproved of his father's showing compassion and mercy towards the younger son? And with ample justification.

The older brother knows *exactly* what the younger son has been up to all those long nights in the big city. For years he has born witness to his father's pain and grief. He's heard the whispers around town; he knows what embarrassment his brother is causing the family.

So, when his little brother comes home, older brother doesn't want to hear about how hard things have been. He doesn't care that little bro hit rock bottom in the city. He doesn't give a rip about the gangsters he's crossed or the drugs he has abused or the time he's done in jail. He cares not one iota about the struggles and self-inflicted damage little bro has suffered. Because he has witnessed firsthand the pain his own family has endured in his absence. A price has to be paid for that, right? There must be punishment. He likely would have agreed with the younger son's assessment. Welcome him back if you must, but as a slave, for that is what he has earned.

Have you ever had someone do something that hurt you deeply? Or damaged your relationship seemingly beyond repair? And then they came back to apologize and make amends? Were you able to let go of that hurt and anger and welcome them back into your life? That's a hard thing to do, but it's what Jesus seems to be getting at here. Grudges are comfortable things. They become like friends, they keep us warm at night. And they can slowly destroy us. Our sense of justice leads us to believe that wrongs must be made right. But Jesus seems to be saying here that relationship is more important than repayment of debt. That what needs to be made right is our relationships with God and one another, not the tables on a balance sheet of rights and wrongs.

Every act has consequences. Laws require that some wrongs come with a price that must be paid. Jesus does not dispute that. But what we see in this story of the prodigal is a call to the older son, and by extension, to us, to let go of the hurt and anger; to set aside the grudges and the desire for retribution and celebrate when one who was lost has found the way home.

Mae Bua Chaicheun is a rice farmer in northern Thailand. Since her husband died, she has tended the fields by herself. When 12 boys and their soccer coach became trapped in a cave two weeks ago, she began volunteering at the sight, cooking for the divers and soldiers who were working to get them out.

During the course of the rescues, engineers rigged huge pumps to drain water from the caves. 130 million liters of water were sent gushing down the mountainside. When Mae Bua Chaicheun returned home, she found that much of this water had wound up in her rice fields, flooding them, ruining her crop, destroying her livelihood.

But she did not express concern for what was owed her. Instead she said this: "It doesn't matter. It's fine. I just want the children to get out alive ... Children are more important than rice. The rice can always regrow. But we can't regrow the children."<sup>1</sup>

To be repaid; made whole, certainly feels good. But when a brother or sister returns, our losses are not what matters, it is the relationship restored; a life renewed that matters.

We long for God to forgive us when we ask. And God does. That is the comfort of the prodigal's story. But we are expected to do the same for others. And that is its challenge. And that may be perhaps the steepest challenge in all of scripture.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

#### End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Barker, Anne. "Rice Farmer Plans to Keep Volunteering despite Flooded Farms." *ABC News*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 6 July 2018, 4:55 PM, [www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-07/thailand-cave-rescue-water-floods-volunteers-rice-farm/9951636](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-07/thailand-cave-rescue-water-floods-volunteers-rice-farm/9951636).