

***“Earned, Paid For, Given”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent**  
**April 7, 2019**

**Old Testament Reading: Genesis 50:15-21**

<sup>15</sup>Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” <sup>16</sup>So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup>‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup>Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” <sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup>So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

**New Testament Reading: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” <sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable...

<sup>11</sup>...“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.’”



***“Earned, Paid For, Given”***

The story of the prodigal son is one of the most well-known and well-loved stories in the Bible. A sinful son returns to his father to find not scorn and punishment as he expected, but kindness and welcome. For generations the church has used this parable to illustrate the depth and breadth of God’s grace that forgives our iniquities and welcomes us home. But this story is no syrupy sweet Lifetime original movie. In crafting this parable, Jesus shows the prodigal to be a pretty ugly character, which creates a dynamic contrast with his father and older brother. Consider how really atrocious the younger son’s actions were:

1. The inheritance. It would be perfectly normal for a son to receive a portion of his father’s estate. Deuteronomy spells-out the process by which sons are to have their father’s wealth apportioned them. The oldest would get the biggest part and the younger sons would each get a portion of what was left.<sup>1</sup> But this was supposed to happen *after* the father died.

That the younger son is asking for it while his father is still alive shows a ridiculous amount of disrespect for both his father and for the traditions of the community.

2. The family legacy. The son's inheritance would have most likely been a piece of his dad's land. That he was able to waste his inheritance in wild *spending* means that he must have sold that land. Land was considered a gift from God and families only sold their land when they were at their most desperate. Land was not just another asset to be liquidated. It symbolized part of their connection to their family history and to God. For the son to sell his father's land just to have money, would have been a slap in the face to his father and an affront to his Jewish tradition.
3. Sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll. The son blows through his money in what the NRSV calls "dissolute living." Dissolute is not a word we use commonly, but it is a perfect word to describe the son's spending spree because it means "indifferent to moral restraints; given to immoral or improper conduct..."<sup>2</sup> Jesus leaves out the sordid details, but it is safe to say that the son's lifestyle was not the kind of thing we should talk about in church. Later the older brother accuses him of having spent his inheritance on "prostitutes." So, it's not too hard to imagine the younger son living what the Eagles called, "life in the fast lane - everything all the time."
4. The unclean-ness. When a famine hits the land the younger son now calls home, he has nothing left by which to provide for himself. The pile of money that must have seemed inexhaustible, is now completely gone. So, he turns to his only option: working for a living. But he doesn't take just *any* job; he works with pigs. That may seem like good steady work, but consider this: both Deuteronomy and Leviticus declare pigs to be unclean and the Talmud said, "cursed be the man who would breed swine."<sup>3</sup> By doing this work, he has made himself ritually unclean, all the time, every day.

So, the son didn't just run-off on a "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" weekend bender. He has rejected his father, and his family legacy, and his moral upbringing, and his religious tradition. The younger son has sunk about as low as he can go. He is has chosen to be someone other than *the person he was created and intended to be*. And that is the very nature of sin.

His father and brother had every reason to be disappointed with him - and angry.

And when he can sink no further into the swamp his life has become, he decides to turn back. But he does so not expecting to return to what he was. He does so in hopes of finding something just marginally better than what he has. He has no intention of returning to his father as a son. He understands that because of what he did, that is no longer an option for him. His only hope is to return as a servant. He is brutally, painfully aware of the drama and heartbreak his departure caused. He knows that his return will bring him scorn and punishment; that he will hear the words "I told you so" over and over again. But, he suspects that his father will at least let him work - and by that work he will be able to eat. His life will not be what it was, but it will be better than what it is.

The prodigal son prepares his speech. He will walk right up to his father and say these words: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."

But there is one thing he does not and really cannot account for: his father's love. His father runs out to meet him and just as he launches into this speech, the father interrupts him. "I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." was as far as he got before the father starts shouting instructions to his servants to bring a robe and a ring and to prepare a fatted calf for a banquet! One of the things his father calls for is shoes for his son's feet. If the robe and the ring didn't make it clear, the shoes do. Only family members were given shoes - servants were not.<sup>4</sup> The son has rejected everything it meant to be his father's son and he knows it. He came back, but only in the hopes of being a servant. Yet his father welcomes him back not as a servant but as a son.

We hear this story and we are reminded that God is so very much like the father and we are so often like the son. We turn from the things that are important to God and we embrace a way of life that does not always glorify God or ourselves. Yet - when like the prodigal son - we turn back to God, God rushes out to meet us and welcome us home. God is willing to mend the relationship that we have broken. That is remarkably good news, especially in this season of lent when we focus so much on the ways we turn from God.

But if we stop here, we miss something very important about this story and that is what happens with the other son. Almost forgot about him, didn't we? Jesus begins the parable by telling us there was a man who had *two* sons.

The older son is unwilling to so easily and quickly forgive his younger brother. You see, he stayed home and worked his father's farm. He honored his family traditions and his religious heritage. And he watched his younger brother reject all of that and break his father's heart in the process. Even if the father was a soft-hearted old soul, the older son was not. He *could not* forgive his brother for what he had done.

Now it doesn't seem that the older son takes issue with his younger brother coming home. In fact, it probably brought him some satisfaction to see his brother, who had left home acting like he was ten-feet-tall and bullet-proof, come crawling back now with only the clothes on his back and the stink of pigs hanging about him. No, his return was not the problem. It was his father's reaction.

Punishment would have been acceptable. Scorn. Derision. Forcing the younger brother to apologize and work off his transgressions; that's the way the older son would have done it. Let his younger brother sleep in the servants' quarters and work the most menial tasks on the farm for a while; then – and only then – after he had been humbled and put in his place, after he'd been made to pay for what he'd done, maybe then they could talk about letting him back in the family. But this ... this banquet with music and dancing and barbecue ... how could his father welcome his low-life, punk of a brother with a party like that? With no apologies, no atonement, no restitution? What had he done to deserve this?

For older brother it's all about economics. There's what you've earned and what you must pay for. The older brother stuck around and did his work and honored his father and his traditions and religious heritage. He believes he has earned everything. The younger brother rejected all of that and did a lot of damage in the process. Older brother believes there's a great deal more for which he must still pay.

But God's grace and mercy do not work on human economic terms. We do not earn God's love. Nor when we repent and turn back from our sins are we required to pay for all the damage we have done in the process. That doesn't mean we get away with something. It's not that God suddenly forgets who we are and what we've done. No, **God knows exactly who and what we are. God loves us anyway!** We can't do anything to earn God's love and mercy. That's what we call "Grace."

Yet we hear the older son tell his father that he had been working "like a slave" all his life. And because of all that hard work and dedication, the older son felt that he had *earned* something the younger son had not. So, he refuses to go in to the banquet. Older brother stands there, outside the party, seething. So, the father comes out to him. Just as he ran to meet the younger son, the father leaves his party to go out and find his older son to try to bring him in, too.

That makes no sense. But God's grace makes no sense. Yet we are the beneficiaries of it every day. And we are called, as was the older brother, to extend that grace-filled forgiveness to others. Which can be a really hard thing to do. Because we tend to think in economic terms, too. There's what you've earned and then there is what you're expected to pay for. We tend to forgive people who we feel have *earned* forgiveness, e.g.: People who have apologized, who are contrite and suitably remorseful. But there are people who hurt us or the ones we love, and for them, there is only the debt that they owe. Until that debt is paid, there can be no forgiveness.

But here is the thing about forgiveness – it's good for you. When we forgive another person, it essentially makes two things possible: it can heal your broken relationship with them and it can heal something broken inside you. Anger is a natural human emotion. But when you continue to nurture that anger, letting it grow and flourish in the hothouse of your heart, feeding on it, drawing energy from it, then that anger can be a barrier to the health of your relationship with that person. Letting go of that anger can make that relationship possible again, or at the very least, it can help you to be at peace with them.

But forgiveness can also heal the brokenness inside you. How much weight do we carry around in grudges and old hurts? How hard is it to be happy when we continue to hold onto past wrongs? Mark Twain is credited with having said that "Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured."<sup>5</sup> Forgiving can set *you* free.

To forgive is to stop stewing over it; to stop chewing on it; to stop rehearsing over and over what you would say to them the next time you see them. Forgiveness means to stop relating the story to your friends; to stop trying to hurt the one who wronged you. Remember when you were a kid and you had a sore and your mom would tell you “stop picking at it or it’s never going to heal!” Well, forgiveness is when you stop messing with it, so it can heal. Leave it alone. In the words of Taylor Swift, “Shake it off.”<sup>6</sup> Or if *Frozen* is more your thing, “Let it go.”<sup>7</sup>

The older son was so wrapped up in his anger over what his younger brother had done that he could not let go of it. But the story doesn’t give us a satisfactory ending. We see the younger son’s repentance and the father’s grace-filled mercy and love ... but we do not know what becomes of the older son. The story ends with him standing outside the party, and we are left to wonder: does he ever go in?

Forgiveness takes work. It takes time. It takes a lot of prayer and leaning-on God for support. It can be “easier said than done.” I once read that forgiveness is like trying to stop a large tower bell with a clapper from ringing. When you stop pulling on the rope, the bell still swings for a while, tolling even though you’re not pulling on the rope any more. But, once you let go, it *will* eventually stop. It just takes time and patience to wait for it to stop being so noisy and disruptive. The longer and harder you’ve been pulling that rope, the longer it’s going to be before the bell stops ringing.

The bigger the hurt, the deeper the anger. The deeper the anger, the harder it will be to forgive. But the first step is making a conscious decision to forgive. And then making a conscious effort to try. Everyday. And then being patient and prayerful as we work at it.

But when we choose *not* to forgive; when we choose to keep on carrying the burden of that old wound, waiting for satisfaction, holding out for restitution, the only person we really hurt, is ourselves. When we can’t work toward forgiveness, then we become like that older brother, standing there outside the joy and the reverie, demanding what we’ve earned, expecting what we’ve paid for, missing out on the grace that God has given.

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

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 21:15-17, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> "Dissolute." *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, n.d. Web. 07 Mar. 2016. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/dissolute?s=t>>.

<sup>3</sup> Shurpin, Yehuda. "May a Jew Raise Swine?" *Chabad.org*. Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center, n.d. Web. 07 Mar. 2016. <[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/976496/jewish/May-a-Jew-Raise-Swine.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/976496/jewish/May-a-Jew-Raise-Swine.htm)>.

<sup>4</sup> Barclay, William. *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1975. 205. Print.

<sup>5</sup> "Mark Twain Quote." *BrainyQuote*. Xplore, n.d. Web. 07 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/marktwain120156.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Swift, Taylor. *Shake It Off*. Taylor Swift. Max Martin, 2014. CD.

<sup>7</sup> *Frozen*. Dir. Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee. Perf. Kristen Bell, Idina Menzel, Jonathan Groff. Walt Disney Animation Studios/Walt Disney Studios, 2013. DVD.