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Maundy Thursday  
Luke 15:11-24

The parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps one of the best known parables of the Bible. It is also one of the most controversial and debated parables of the Bible. The astonishing grace displayed by the father is too much for some people. I think that if we are honest, the grace displayed in this parable is probably too much for *most* of us to accept. Some biblical scholars believe that the entirety of the Christian faith is found in this one parable—this story of the wayward son and of the loving parent. I invite us to reflect on this parable tonight because I think it offers another lens through which we can consider the events of Holy Week. This parable, which is fundamentally about us and God’s relationship with us, becomes more than just a story—it comes to life and gets retold through the events of Jesus’ last week of life.

The parable begins with the rejection and betrayal of love. The son’s demand for his share of the inheritance is a shocking and painful rejection of the family bonds. In the ancient Middle East, the inheritance to children was distributed upon the father’s death. So, the son’s demand was the equivalent of saying to the father, “I wish you were dead.” This demand was not only greedy; it was a rejection of the relationship. Can there be anything more painful than a child’s rejection of a parent’s love? Think about a parent’s emotional investment in his or her child. The parent cherishes the child from infancy, watches the child grow and guides the child on life’s journey, gives their heart, their time, their resources for that child’s wellbeing. The parent simply loves that child totally and completely. How utterly devastating, then, when the child rejects the relationship without thought or care. It is the deepest kind of betrayal. But *we*

*are that child.* And God is that parent. Betrayal is part of the parable but it is also part of our story with God. And as we know, it is also part of the story of Jesus' last week.

The ripple effect of the son's sin widens to touch the lives of many other people besides the father. His action alienates him from his older brother, impacts the older brother's relationship with their father, and distresses the wider community whose moral and ethical code the son has ruptured. As the son heads off for a life of his own making, he leaves behind tremendous wreckage in the form of alienation, outrage, loss of trust, and damaged relationships.

The father could have refused his son's demand. But he doesn't. The father will not bind the son to him through coercion but instead gives the son the freedom he desires and the inheritance he demands. And then as we know, the son squanders it all. He wastes the gift!

Recalling that we are the child in this story, we could consider how we too have squandered the gift given with the freedom to choose: how we squander life chasing material goods and wealth, how we squander our bodies with destructive habits, how we squander the earth pursuing an unsustainable lifestyle, how we squander our lives with bitterness and hatred, how we squander the present moment because we can't move out of the past, how we squander our relationships because we are overly-scheduled and too busy. There are many ways the gift is squandered.

And when the boy begins to truly suffer from his actions, when his depravation becomes too much for him, he decides to return home where at least he may earn an income as one of this father's hired hands. This is not a decision born out of true repentance but rather a pragmatic decision. In his father's house, he will at least not starve.

The son begins his journey home. But, we are told, "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."

The whole story pivots on this one phrase: while he was still far off. Prior to this point, the parable is a tale of sin and brokenness—the kind of thing that happens all too often in our world and in our families and in our lives. But here is where this story becomes astonishingly radical. The father runs to embrace this callous and selfish boy without even hearing a statement of regret or remorse—which we as the reader know the son doesn't even intend to make.

“While he was still far off” sums up what Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are all about. “While he was still far off” is not simply a statement of geography but a recognition of the states of our hearts and minds. While we are still far off, God has compassion for us. While we are still far off, before we confess our sins, before we repent, before we make amends, before we turn our lives around, before we even realize the magnitude of our brokenness, God rushes to us with love and grace.

It is a costly love. In the parable, the father's love comes with the cost of humiliating himself before the entire village. The father does what no self-respecting, dignified patriarch in the ancient world would do—he runs. He picks up his robes, indecently exposing his ankles for all to see, and like an emotional woman, he runs to embrace his son before the villagers could decide to banish the boy for his egregious violations of the community standards. The father runs to save his son. It is the injured party who rushes to heal, and to reconcile, and to bring the child home again.

Maundy Thursday is about that kind of costly love. On Maundy Thursday we recall that it is the injured party who rushes to us while we are still far off. God rushes to us with costly love and grace in order to heal, to reconcile, and to bring us home again.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son leaves us wondering whether the father's display of costly love will touch his selfish child in some way. After seeing his father's great

demonstration of love and forgiveness, will the son's heart be changed? Will he see the errors of his ways and change his life? Will the child be transformed? Will we?