

“Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sin is covered.” AMEN!

With a show of hands, how many here
are an only child? (Spoiled brats!)

Okay, how many of you,
if you had siblings,
are the oldest? (Control freaks!)

Any middle children in the room? (The peacemakers!)

Last, but not least, how
many are the youngest child. (The babies!) :-)

Just as each of us are unique in birth order
so does this parable mean different things
to different people.

If you are the responsible child, then,
it's the parable of the responsible child.

If you were one who walked to
the beat of your own drum,
and broke many a rule along the way,
then it is the parable of irresponsible child.

And if you are annoyed, in any way,

at the behavior of the parent in this text
then it is the parable of misunderstood grace.

Each title has truth. (Pause)

Once upon a time, a dying man was
rambling in his speech.

The man's daughter kept watch at his
bedside trying to figure out what her father
was trying to say.

Something had happened long ago, she discovered.

Her father, as a boy, had done something
that caused trouble to a neighbor who'd
tried to throw a party.

Through careful listening and asking questions
she discovered that her dad, with a friend,
moved all the signs that pointed to
the neighbor's home when they were kids.

The guest couldn't find the location of the party
and got frustrated and went home.

He said, the people who threw the party were
so sad that no one came and had
to throw away the feast they'd prepared.

The man couldn't forgive himself. (Pause)

A dying woman, in the oncologists office,
was speaking to the chaplain.

"I'm getting what I deserve," she said.

"I've smoked since I was a teenager and
drank like a fish, ever since."

She spoke softly, but with deep hurt.

"This cancer is exactly what I deserve,
for the way I've behaved.

Booze and cigarettes wrecked my marriage and
now they're finishing the job by taking my life.

If my parents had not been addicted to these things,
then maybe I never would have been either.

I will never forgive them." (Pause)

Amy and Rachel were best friends.

They each got new dresses and decided
that they'd wear them to school the next day.

On their way home from school,
in their new dresses,
they came upon puddles and were
careful to avoid them.

Rachel suggested they take off their shoes to
not get them wet, which they both did.

It didn't take long to realize they couldn't resist.

Amy splashed Rachel and then Rachel tried
to splash Amy, but managed to get herself
even more wet.

The girls giggled at the mess they'd made.

When Rachel's mom saw her daughter
soaking wet she asked, "What happened?"

"Amy splashed me!" She confessed.

Rachel's mom was upset and swatted Amy's
bottom causing her to cry.

Just then Amy's mom came out of the garage
and shouted, "Why did you swat my child?"

Next came the moms argument, and the
shouting at one another.

Meanwhile. Rachel and Amy went back to
the puddles and began to dig canals for
the water to flow.

They laughed and played while chasing the water.

That was when Amy's grandmother came out
and stood between the fighting mothers
and pointed at the little girls.

"Look! They are wiser than you!

While you fight, they play happily together."

The moms looked at the girls and
then at each other.

They hung their heads and finally shook hands.
(Pause)

These short stories give us examples of people's
need of forgiveness and an example reconciliation.

Where do we find ourselves?

Are you carrying hurts from the past?

A baggage of regret, suitcase of guilt, or

a duffel bag full of the inability to forgive others
or yourself. (Pause)

The gospel begins with these words,
“Now all the tax collectors and sinners
were coming near to listen to Jesus.

And the Pharisees and the scribes
were grumbling saying,

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Without taking these words taken into account
we can totally miss the point of the parable.

Tax collectors were scum.

They were like fleas on the scum.

They had sold out their own people
for security and for money.

Collecting taxes for Rome and scraping money off
the top for themselves.

They were like mobsters doing the mob boss' bidding.

Who wouldn't want them to get what they deserved?

Jesus not only welcomed them but ate with them.

No one knows who the sinners were
that Jesus ate with, or what they did
to earn the label.

We only know that came near to Jesus
to listen to him and he ate with them, too.

Which might not mean that much to us,
but in that culture in that day,

people were expected to eat with others
who dwelled on their level, socially
and economically.

When you ate with someone back then it forged
a bond with them and made a
mutual statement that said
you belonged together. (Pause)

Historically, in my sermons, I've
focused on the younger son's sinfulness and
the father's graceful love and forgiveness

because I am a younger sibling, the spoiled baby. :-)

And I judgmentally shook my head at the older brother's

inability to celebrate the return of the prodigal son.

Yet, upon careful reading today it's apparent
that the elder son wasn't even invited
to the celebration.

He was out in the field working and
when the day was done he returned to find
music and dancing.

He had to ask one of the slaves what was going on?

And then he heard that the younger had returned
and father was throwing a celebration feast for
the one who'd made all the wrong choices.

Who wouldn't be miffed? Who wouldn't grumble about
the injustice and lack of punishment; accountability?

Where's the reward for doing the right thing
and for following the rules? (Pause)

When the parable slaps us awake,
like they tend to do,

we might realize that no matter
what our birth order or number of
siblings we have,

we live under the pretense that good things

happen to good people and bad things
happen to bad people.

We dutifully proclaim that punishment
should occur to the bad ones, unless that is,
we are the bad ones. :-)

We also are faced with the realization that,
no matter who we are, all of us (all human beings)
are sinners and tax collectors.

You and I are the worst people in society. :-)

To me, though - you're the best, worst people.

Hopefully, to you, I am the best worst pastor.

But regardless of the way we feel,
or the way we think, or even
the ways we behave -

Jesus is among us and wants to
fellowship here and eat with us.

What reasons do you have to reject God's mercy?

The parable today, tells us that sometimes
the only thing that matters is that one returns.

The extravagantly wasteful son returned and
the hard working rule follower returned.

Sometimes the only thing that matters
is that one returns.

That's good reason to celebrate.

AMEN!