

Today is Father's Day, a day in which we honor dear old dad and give him a funny card or something he will never use. There was a wealthy Texan who always gave his dad unique gifts on Father's Day. One year he gave him hang-gliding lessons. Then the next year he gave him a collection of Ray Charles' greatest hits. But one year he felt that he had outdone himself. He purchased a rare talking bird that could speak five different languages and could sing "The Yellow Rose of Texas" while standing on one foot. This talented bird cost \$10,000, but the son thought it was worth every penny. This would be the Father's Day gift his dad would never forget. A week after Father's Day, the son called his dad and asked, "Dad, how did you like the bird?" "It was delicious," his father replied.

When asked: "What is a father?" a little boy replied: "A father is a person who has pictures in his wallet where he used to have money?" A writer for the *Florida Sentinel* sent a Father's Day card to his dad that read: "Being a father can be expensive, time-consuming, frustrating, confusing and emotionally draining.... actually it's a lot like golf!"

Now some of us have pleasant memories and good relationships with our fathers, while some of us don't. Each of us here this morning has different opinions about our fathers or those who have filled that role in our lives. But this morning, I don't want to talk about our relationships with our earthly fathers, instead I would like for us to think about something that we can all relate to – our relationship with our Heavenly Father – God. One of the best Biblical passages on the fatherly characteristics of God as our Heavenly Father is found in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 11-32.

Read Luke 15:11-32

This text has traditionally been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But it could also be labeled: "A Man Had Two Sons," "The Compassionate Father and Angry Brother," or "The Waiting Father." This is truly one of the best of all the short stories ever written in either the Bible or all literature. The first character discussed in this story is the youngest son, but the main character is the waiting father who yearned for the return of his foolish son.

The story begins with the younger son going to his father and demanding his share of the inheritance. Like many young people, he couldn't wait to leave home and be on his own. A lot of young folks live under the false assumption that once they leave home with all its rules and restrictions then life will be better and easier. Mark Twain once said: "When I was fourteen, my father was so dumb that I could hardly stand to be around the old man, but when I got to be twenty-one, I was amazed at how much the old man had learned in just seven years."

The younger son showed total disrespect for his father by asking for his share of the inheritance before his father's death. Despite all this, the father still gave his son the freedom to choose how to handle his inheritance. Real love allows freedom while false love fosters dependence. The young man immediately collected all that he had and headed for a far country; in other words, he tried to put as much distance between his father's authority and himself as possible. In this new land, the young man lived it up spending all his money on wine, women, and song until he was flat broke. Like many people, both young and old, who suddenly come into a large amount of money, he spent it as if there was no tomorrow; giving no thought to saving any for the future or a rainy day.

Of course, once his money ran out so did his so-called friends and more importantly, his food. So he had to go to work for a local farmer tending pigs of all things. To a Jewish lad this had to be the worst of all possible jobs since the Jewish faith considered pigs unclean. As a matter of fact, the Jewish law stated: "Cursed is he who feeds swine." Now the young man got so hungry that he even considered eating the pigs' slop. Now if you have ever slopped pigs, you know how disgusting that can be. To emphasize how lonely and depressing his situation was Jesus tells us that "no one gave him anything."

In verse 17, the young man has one of those turning points in life that we have all experienced at one time or another. In the mire of the pig pen, up to his elbows in slop, "he came to his senses." How many of us have been in a similar situation and came to our senses and realized that the only way to true happiness was to return to our Heavenly Father? Thinking that he no longer deserved to be called his father's son, the young man resolves to leave the far country and return home to his father.

The expression "he came to his senses" affirms the human capacity to renounce our foolish ways and to reclaim our heritage and potential. The son realized that he no longer had any claim on his father's property, and morally he no longer had the right to be called his son. Therefore, since he was no longer a son, maybe his father would allow him to be a servant in his house. Because his father's servants had more than enough to eat while he was starving in his present situation. The pig pen had washed away all his pride and arrogance. Unfortunately, we all know from experience that life has a way of doing that at times. Home never looks as good as when it is remembered from a far country.

The turning point in this young man's life was when he decided to return to his father. He was not seeking to improve his circumstances; his selfishness was gone. He realized that he had sinned against God and his father. On his way home, the younger son practiced his speech. The journey home begins with the young man coming to his senses and ends with his going to his father. This is really an act of repentance. Someone once said: "Repentance means learning to say "Abba" – Father again, putting one's total trust in our Heavenly Father, returning to the

Father's house and to the arms of the Father." The act of returning is an expression of love; for love is the power that reunites the separated.

Now the story shifts to the waiting father. No other image has come closer to describing the loving nature of God than the waiting father, peering down the long dusty road longing for the return of his son, then springing to his feet and running to embrace him. In ancient Palestine, it was considered undignified for a grown man to run. Yet this father filled with love and compassion set aside all concern for what was proper and ran as fast as he could to his long lost son, showing how much he had been longing for his return.

The boy jumps right into his prepared speech, but his father interrupts him, giving instructions to his servants to bring him the best robe which represented honor; a ring which represented power and authority; and sandals which signified that he was his son and not a servant. By these acts the father publicly receives his son back into his house. It was a sign to the rest of the village that the boy was to be treated as his son once again.

In joy for the return of the wayward son, the father orders that the fatted calf be killed. Now meat was not a part of the daily diet and was normally reserved for special occasions, and this was definitely a time for celebration. The father's words summed up the significance of the occasion: "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." It's important to note that while the son had left home and disrespected his father, the father's love for his child had been there all along!

Now the story shifts to the older son who had not left but remained at home working for his father. When he comes in from working in the fields all day, he hears music and laughter, and asks one of the servants what's going on. When he is told that his younger brother has returned home and that his father is throwing a party to celebrate the occasion, the older son gets mad, pouts, and refuses to go in and join the party. Notice what the father does; like with the younger son, he takes the initiative and goes to the oldest son and tries to reason with him.

The conversation with the older son is totally different from the one that the father just had with the returning younger son. In his anger, the older son jumps his father, not even properly addressing him as "father," but beginning to vent his anger with "look." You know that whenever anyone starts a conversation like this that they have something that they want to get off their chest. The older son likens his role to that of a servant which ironically his brother was willing to accept on his return. You also know that he is upset when he refers to his brother as "this son of yours." Although the older son had not addressed him as "father," the father's first word "son" affirms their relationship. If repentance for the prodigal son meant learning to say "father" again, then for the older son it meant learning to say "brother" again.

When you really understand this beautiful story, you soon realize that it is an injustice to call it the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” for the son is not really the hero. A better title would be the “Parable of the Loving Father,” for it tells us more about the father’s love than a son’s rebellion.

Can you see God as the father in this story? The story tells us a lot about the forgiveness of God. How long do you think the father had been sitting on the porch watching for the image of his son to appear on the horizon? I suspect that he had kept his eyes on that road every day since his son had left home, waiting for him to return. And when he saw him at last, he ran and embraced him in love. This was definitely not the kind of reception the wayward son had expected. There was no “I told you so,” no questions as where have you been and what happened to all that money, no judgment and no punishment. There was only joy and love in the heart of the father, and that is exactly the way it is when we who are lost and have sinned return to God the Father and asks for His forgiveness. The heart of this story is about those moments of unexpected grace when a Father’s love is shown with wide open arms.

As you listen to this story, which son do you more closely identify with? The rebellious younger son who is selfish, always wanting his way, always wanting what he thinks is owed to him, proud, arrogant, and who thinks that he has all the answers. Or the older son who represents those of us who think we can make it on our own, who think we can earn God’s love and grace, and who are proud of the kind of lives we live and lack any sympathy for those less fortunate. Many of us can identify more with the older brother in this parable than the wild younger brother – the one who tried to do everything right and sat on the sidelines complaining when he didn’t get any credit. He served his father not out of love, but out of a sense of obligation.

Our text says that the younger son traveled to a far country. The far country has been designated as any place that is “one step away from God.” One author said that “it is anywhere that a person tries to live without God.” The far country is marked by an attitude of mistrust in the Father’s will. The far country is located in an attitude of self-interest that defines one’s purpose for living in terms of getting and having, instead of in service and obedience to God. The younger son rebelled against his father’s standards as we do at times against God by refusing to entrust our lives to Him. Many Christians are living in a far country because they do not appreciate the inheritance and grace that is available to all of us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Even the older son who was living under the same roof as his father was actually living in the far country even though he had never changed his address. In reality, the far country is located in the heart of any person who does not trust God as their Heavenly Father. Some of us here this morning may be in the far country. As the father in the story allowed his children freedom to be independent because he loved them, so God gives us freedom to choose whether we will live in a far country or in a close relationship with Him.

Every one of us here this morning is a child of God. Every one of us is important to Him. In our text, the father, who represents God, loved and cared for both of his sons – the rebellious one and the stubborn one. Each was important in his eyes as he reached out in love to both of them.

Now I don't know which of these two sons you relate to the most, but isn't it a wonderful thought that God is like the prodigal's father who is constantly waiting and watching for us to come to our senses and come home. No other image is more descriptive of God than the waiting father, peering down the road, longing for the return of his child, then springing to his feet and running to embrace him. Many of us have experienced this as we sat up waiting for our child to come home safely on a Saturday night. God is like a patient parent waiting at the door with open arms for us to come to our senses and come home.

The parable ends with a question – did the older son ever join the celebration? Did he go in and welcome his brother home, or did he stay outside pouting and feeling wronged? Jesus ends the parable here because this is really a question for each of us; a decision that we each must make on our own. Who's our Daddy? Is it God or the world? Do we stay in a far country or do we go in and join the celebration? If we go in we will find the love and grace that only God can give. But if you are living in a far country this morning, it's time to come home to your Father. God is sitting on the porch waiting and watching for you; won't you come home to your Daddy? Amen