

“Runaway Son”

Luke 15:11-32

We are in the second week of a series I am calling, “Stories.” Jesus told a lot of stories, what we call parables, to illustrate how God wants us to live. These parables used everyday images: seeds, sheep, and coins; things common people could relate to. Jesus crafted these stories to help people discover the reality of the kingdom of heaven.

Today’s parable is often called the story of the prodigal son. What is a prodigal? That’s not a word we often use. A prodigal is one who spends lavishly or recklessly. However, there is a secondary meaning, derived from this parable – a prodigal is also one who repents and returns home.

I like to call this parable the story of the lost son, or the runaway son. I know a little bit about running away. When I was four years old, I ran away from “Tot Lot”, a summer program. My mom’s friend found me in downtown East Tawas, two blocks from the school and one block from the four-lane highway. Apparently, I told her I was just walking home. About a year later, as I was riding the bus back from kindergarten, I decided to ride all the way to my friend’s house instead of getting off at home. I thought I could find something better, something more fun to do, rather than stay in the protective comfort of my parents.

I submit to you that there is a desire in all of us to run away. Maybe we try to run away from problems. Maybe we want to cast off restraint and live life outside the lines. Maybe we are enticed by the thrill of adventure, or simply wish to find a new life away from our past. Yet, many times we do not anticipate the problems that we will encounter in this new, unknown territory. The number one problem we have is this: we become lost.

There are three main characters in this parable: the younger son, who became lost, the father who welcomed him back, and the older brother who never left. I want us to consider each person in turn.

Let us first consider the younger son. I cannot tell you his reason for asking for his inheritance early and deciding to leave home. It certainly would seem offensive to me if my son did that. Yet you should notice in the scripture that Jesus says nothing about the father objecting. The father gives his son what he asks for – a third of the inheritance, in fact, since the oldest son should have received a double portion.

This wayward son obviously wants to explore what the world has to offer. He travels far and spends recklessly. And his high living leaves him penniless and friendless. He is forced to work for a pig farmer – not the most glamorous position, I assure you.

Has anyone here every visited a pig farm? My grandfather had pigs. The pig sty was not one of my favorite places to go. Many of you probably saw live pigs at the county fair last week, but those pigs were washed and cleaned for show. Not these pigs. The lost son learned a lesson: when you work with pigs, you start to smell like a pig. And that is simply gross.

The scripture says this boy is so hungry, he considers eating pig slop. He is that lost. He has made decisions he regrets. And he thinks he has offended his father so much that he can only beg to return to his former home as a servant, not as a son. Maybe he is hoping for something better. At least he trusts his father to be righteous and not leave him on the street to starve. But frankly, this lost boy does not trust his father enough to forgive him.

Have you ever had that feeling that you destroyed a relationship by something you did or said? I can think of times when I have. I hate that sinking feeling in my stomach, when I anticipate seeing that person again. Now imagine thinking your own father would not forgive you. That would be awful.

We live in a world where we hope for forgiveness, but too often, we do not expect forgiveness. We live in a world where public figures fall from grace, and we do not hear many redemption stories. We live in constant fear of failure. Too often, we think, “If I mess up, I’m going to be ostracized forever. No one will ever forgive me again.”

For this young man, the pain of hunger brought him to his senses. He took stock of his situation. This son knew his father was good, but he didn’t know how good until he took a chance and went home.

At this point, the focus of the story shifts to the father. The father sees his son a long way off, as the boy walks that long road back home. How many times had his father been staring down that road, waiting, hoping? How many days went by, empty with pain of longing, wishing his son would return, knowing there was nothing he could do about it? And yet, finally, one day, the father notices a figure in the distance. A long way off, he recognizes his son. He sees him, and you have to know he smelled him, too.

The very first thing the father does is run to his boy and embrace him. Imagine the scene. Hugs and kisses, pig-poop and all. The son starts to make his apology: “Dad, I’m sorry. I don’t deserve to be your son anymore.” But Dad glosses over it and starts to throw a party. He calls for a robe to clothe his son. A robe is a sign of prosperity. You don’t work with a robe on. He gives his son a ring, a symbol of authority. He calls for sandals, because only slaves go around

barefoot. Robe, ring, sandals – These are all the exact opposite of what the son asked for. These are all symbols that the son is again a member of the family.

Do you know what I love best about this scene? The father gives all these gifts without asking the boy to clean up first. The father is so happy, he has to throw a party immediately! His gifts make the boy a family member again. There is nothing that the boy does himself to earn his forgiveness. Do you know what that’s called? That’s grace.

Look at your Bibles for a moment. Verse 24 is so beautiful. *“For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.*” That sounds like a great place to end the story. But you know there are still eight more verses.

There is a secondary problem in this passage, and I believe Jesus was saving his best punch for last. You see, Luke tells us that Jesus told this story, along with the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin, in front of a group of people that included tax collectors and “sinners”. If you look way back at verse 2, you find that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)

The second problem is this: God’s grace and forgiveness are so good, they are almost too good to believe. And when we see someone else get a break that they didn’t deserve, we get jealous.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I am the middle brother of three sons. That makes me both a younger brother and an older brother. And I know there are times when I probably felt, maybe even said, “It’s not fair how mom and dad let you get away with everything.” My guess is there is at least one other person in this room who has had similar thoughts about their family.

The Pharisees, the teachers of the law, you and I, and anyone else who thinks that grace isn't fair – we all need to need to learn this lesson from the second son. The truth is, we don't celebrate often enough. We think we have to work hard and not mess up, just to receive a little acceptance from God.

Look at the final part of this story. The oldest son sits outside, jealous and angry. His father begs him to come inside to the party. I wish my dad would beg me to come into a party! He wouldn't have to ask me twice!

The older son is just as lost as the younger. The older boy is lost in his thinking. His whole life, he has lived with this motto: “If I just keep my distance, I'll be OK with Dad.” How sad. I know people who would say, “I'm OK, as long as I don't mess up and make God notice me.”

The father tries to correct this misconception. He blatantly states, “Everything I have is yours.” (Luke 15:31b) But did the older son ever ask for it? No! Think of this. The younger son certainly asked for his part! Of course, he misused it, but he asked for it. I believe that the older son was guilty of assuming that his father would never give him anything.

The father cannot understand the oldest son's resentment. This should be a day for rejoicing, not sulking! Look, the father was lavish with both of his sons – the one who returned, and the one who was resentful. The difference is, one boy received that love, and the other rejected it. It appears that the oldest son had no joy in serving his father and being part of the family. He only looked for ways to become hardened.

The father makes no apologies for what the younger son has done. The oldest son misunderstands – the father did not reward the youngest son for his immoral behavior. He rewarded him for recognizing his mistake and returning to

the greatest love he could receive. He does not reward the younger boy for his sin. He rewards him for returning home. The father accepts the younger son’s repentance. There is no blame, only joy in new life.

I have a hard question for you. Who do you want to be? The one who receives the lavish (prodigal) love of the father, or the one who is so resentful of others that not even a party can entice you to be part of the family? God is not impressed with our work. God is impressed with our compassion and ability to receive his love and pass it on.

God is so good to us! He pours out his love on us, his mercy and his grace. God gave his own son up, to die on a cross so that we could have eternal life. That is amazing. That’s grace.

Look at the difference in the attitudes of the father and the oldest son. The father did not complain when the younger son asked for the money. When the younger son repented and returned home, the father did not chide him. The dad didn’t dwell on the past. He celebrated the present. Nothing could stop his joy, and he invited everyone to join the party. But the older son wanted to dwell on his brother’s mistakes. The oldest still disowned the youngest. Look at his words. *“...when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”* He calls him “your son,” not “my brother.” (Luke 15:30) The older brother chose resentment and bitterness instead of joy.

In its original context, this parable was not about the church, but often today we look at it and say, “We can’t let the church become like this. We cannot be jealous when God gives someone mercy and grace.”

Church, we need to celebrate more, not stand outside and miss the party! We need to expect that God is going to send us prodigals – people who are messed up and need help. God, send us people who need Jesus! And when they show up on our doorstep, your door step, do not tell them to clean up first. Love them. Welcome them. And let God do the cleaning. That’s what it means to be fishers of people. We catch them, and God cleans them.

Practice celebrating. Think about a time when you ran from God, and when you ran back to him. Think about a time when you saw someone else return to God. Have you shared that story?