

“Getting Onboard With God”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the teenage boy who (one day) came to his pastor for advice? He said, “Pastor, (this past week) I left home and I did something that (I know) will make my dad furious when he finds out. What should I do?”

The pastor thought for a moment (before replying), and then said, “Well, why don't you go home, confess what you've done to your dad, and he'll probably forgive you and treat you like the prodigal son.”

The boy thought for a moment, thanked his pastor for his advice, and then left.

A few days later he called to report what had happened. He said, “Well, (pastor) I followed your advice (he said), and went home and confessed to my father what I had done.”

“And what did your father do?” the pastor asked. “Did he kill the fatted calf?” “No,” the boy said, “he didn't. But he almost killed the prodigal son.”

There are few stories (in the world) as well-known and well-loved as the one we read today about the son who was a prodigal. Actually, it's a story (today) about two sons who, each, (in their own way) was a prodigal, and about a father who loved them both more than they realized.

And it wasn't a true story Jesus told. (I think we all know that). It was a parable, a story Jesus made up. But it was a story designed (by Jesus) to teach us something true about God, and about how things work in the kingdom of God.

Helmut Thieleke (one of the great German theologians of the 20th century) says this story should actually be called the parable of the waiting father. (And he might well be right.) Because the closer you look at what's going on in the story, the more you begin to see that it's the heart (of the waiting father) that's at the heart.

And that leads to why it was Jesus told the story that he did. Actually, Jesus told three stories, in this same fifteenth chapter of Luke (of a lost sheep, and a lost coin, and a lost son), and all for the same reason. Because, something was happening that needed to be addressed. And it was that (something that was happening) that is key to what the stories are all about.

Luke says, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” And that's when Jesus told the stories he did.

“Getting Onboard with God.” Before getting into the story (and talking about what it has to say to us), let me start by asking you a question. And I'm going to ask you (today) to raise your hands. But do we have any first-born children here this morning. (No matter how old you are.) Raise your hands if you're the oldest child in your family. Alright, we have a few.

And (now) raise your hands if you're the youngest child in your family. Anyone here today who's the youngest? Alright, there're a few of you, as well.

Well, in today's story that's exactly what there was - an older son, and a younger son. And both sons were equally part of the family. And both sons were equally loved by their dad. But the two sons were different from each other. (Have you ever noticed that in families?) Cut from the same mold, same color hair and eyes, but (two children), as different as night and day.

I grew up in a family of six kids. (And it was true with us.) Mary and I have four of our own, (and it's the same thing.)

And not only that, but in families (with more than one child), have you ever noticed how things change as each child comes along? Most parents (at least, in general) are more protective of their first child. (And for good reason.) It's their first attempt at parenting. (And they want it to go right.) And so they sterilize everything (right?). They use flash cards when the kid's only three. (The expectations are high, as are the approaches they take.)

And then along comes the second child, and things begin to relax. The old “five second rule” (on the floor) begins to apply, and back into the mouth it goes. (By the time our fourth came along, we let the dog pick it up, and it was OK.)

And that’s not because we didn’t love the second child (or the third or the fourth), but things change. And kids grow up to be different. (And it’s natural.) The same mold, but night and day.

Now, we don’t get all of the details (in the story) of the two sons. But we learn (early on) that they were different, as was the approach the father takes with each. (And remember), the story is about the father, as much (if not more) than it is about the two sons. And it’s a story Jesus told in response to what was happening. And so what’s happening (in the story) is important to watch.

And so what happens? The younger son comes along and asks for his share of the inheritance. Now, it’s hard to imagine he would even think it, let alone do it. (But he did.) In a Jewish family like that, it never would have happened. But what happens? (In two verses), the father grants the request (gives the boy what he wants), and off he goes.

Now, (if I were the father), and it was one of my two sons (your two sons), I doubt if the response would have been the same. But (remember) it’s not about me (or about you), but about God. And it’s not about our kids, but about his.

“Getting Onboard with God.” And so what do we learn about God (in this story)? We learn all kinds of things about God. First (and foremost), we learn that God loves his children enough to let them go. God loves you enough to set you free.

I hope you know that about God? I trust you know that about God. The Bible says we were “created in his image.” Now, whatever else (that means), it means that we’re free to make choices in life. Moral choices, relationship choices, career and family and financial choices, it doesn’t matter. God has set us free.

And not only that, but he’s given us an inheritance. And the inheritance (he gives) comes in a variety of forms. We have (for example) incredible minds. And we can use them or waste them. We have remarkable bodies. And we can take care of them or abuse them. And we have the gifts of time, and abilities and family and faith. They’re all at our disposal, (all at your disposal). And you’re free! (God has given you every one of them.) And he loves you enough to let you go.

I still remember one of my classes in college. The teacher told a story of (one day) walking along the road with his son, and his son asked him, (he said) “Dad, do you think there’s anywhere in the world where there’s a sign that says ‘Trespassing?’” (He asked his son what he meant.) He said, “Well, because that sign (over there) says ‘No Trespassing.’ Do you think there’s a sign that says ‘Trespassing?’”

The teacher said he laughed and had fun thinking what it would be like to change all of the ‘No’ signs to ‘Yes’ signs. From ‘No Trespassing’ to ‘Trespassing;’ from ‘private keep out’ to ‘public come in if you’d like.’ From ‘stop’ to ‘go;’ from ‘danger’ to ‘you decide for yourself.’

And then he said, “But it’s happened.” (“It’s happened.”) He said, “That’s what God has done with us.” (He said), “We’re free. He’s let us go. And he’s given us an inheritance to spend. And we can do with it what we like.” (And he was right.)

Now, the good news is that God hasn’t left us on our own. (After all, he is our Father.) He’s told us where the danger lies (how we’re to live). But the choice is yours. The decisions you make are up to you.

And there are consequences in life. We all know that. (And that was part of the story.) Jesus says, (the younger son) took off to a “distant country” and there he squandered his wealth in “wild living.” And (one verse later), he’d spent everything he had. And guess what? (Talk about 21st Century stuff!) There was an economic collapse (and he never saw it coming) and he was broke and out of work. And Jesus says “he was in need.” (I’ll bet he was.)

And so what does the father do? He waits. And what does the father want? He wants nothing more than for that day when his son will return home.

You see, there’s a big difference between a lost sheep and a lost coin (and a lost son). The lost sheep and coin don’t make decisions (for themselves). And so the shepherd goes after the sheep. And the woman sweeps the house until she finds the coin. Because it’s not just about us, (and about our return to God), but about God and his desire to seek us out. And thankfully, it works both ways.

But it is different with a lost sheep and a lost coin, (than with a son), who chooses to go off on his own. There are consequences to our actions. What we (choose in life) has implications for life.

Now, maybe I'm wrong. (I'll let you decide.) But I think too many people want it both ways (in life). They want the freedom to make choices, to do in life what they please. And then they want a God who will step in and save them when they mess up. As one cynic put it, "Too many want to sow their wild oats and then (at the same time) pray to God for a crop failure." But it doesn't always work that way.

There are consequences to our actions. What we (choose in life) has implications for life. Next thing we know, we're hanging out with the pigs. And we're wallowing in the slop. And we're thinking back on how it could have been, but it isn't. What might have been, but it's not.

Do you want to know my favorite verse in this story? It's not the most important verse, but it's my favorite. (Do you know what it is?) It's verse 17. It says "When he came to his senses..." ("When he came to his senses...")

What a great verse! (What a great understanding.) It says, "He came to his senses." It says, "He finally figured it out." It says, (he suddenly realized) that he wasn't a pig, but a person. He wasn't a swine, but a son. And he'd made a mistake in life. He'd wandered off where he never should have gone. But he came to his senses. He knew what needed to be done. "And he got up" (in verse 20) and he went home.

My friends, don't ever think that you've wandered so far away (in your life) that you can't return home to God. Don't even (begin to) imagine that what's happened in your life is too big for God to forgive. "While we were yet sinners" (the Bible says), "Jesus died on the cross for us."

(You know the story.) The son had it all planned out. A well-rehearsed speech, a place in his father's house that would be a winning proposition for both. But before he could even begin telling his father what he planned, he was all dressed up (by his father), the fatted calf was killed, and the party and celebration began.

"Getting Onboard with God." And that leads to the second son, (the eldest of the two), who all this time had stayed at home and done what he was told. Now, he wasn't a bad son. He was a good son. He wasn't lost (like his brother). He'd never wandered away (from home) and squandered what he'd been given. But he'd wandered away (from his father), and he'd squandered the position in the family he had. And that's why (in the story), he ended up (not far from his father's house), but in a "distant country" of his own.

You see, there's more than one way to become a prodigal in life. And there's more than one way to break the father's heart. And that's why Jesus told the parable (he did). And that's what this story is (finally) all about.

Again, remember how it all began? (We said it at the beginning.) Luke says, "The tax collectors and sinners were gathering to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" And that's when Jesus told the stories he did. And that's what Jesus wants us to see.

You see, God is in the business of hanging out with sinners. (That's what's going on in the story.) And not to encourage their sin, but to let them know that they're loved. And not to make them feel bad for running away and wasting their lives, (most prodigals in this world already feel bad enough), but to welcome them home (when they return) and to give them a chance to start again.

That's what Jesus does. That's the business he's in. He said, "I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners." (He said) "It's not the healthy (in this world) who need a doctor, but those who are sick."

Jesus told the story to help us to see that God cares about the sick, and that he longs to welcome home those who have strayed away. But he also told the story to help us see what it's like to be standing on the outside looking in, (at what God is doing in this world), and to realize that there truly is more than one way to break the Father's heart.

I find it interesting, that the story (Jesus told) ends without really ending. (Did you notice that?) It's almost as if Jesus leaves it that way so we can decide for ourselves. Because we know what happened to the youngest son. He came home, and was welcomed back, and there was party thrown in his honor. (But the older son?) We don't really know. The story ends without really ending. The older son is left standing outside, still needing to decide.

All we know for sure is the joy of the Father. All we know for sure is what happens in the heart of God when one of his children returns home. "We had to celebrate" (he said), "and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is now alive, he was lost and is now found."

Let me close today with something I found this past week (in getting ready for today's message). It was the results of a nationwide poll (from a few years back) that asked one simple question. The question was "What word or phrase would you most like to hear from someone in your own family?" Do you know what it found? The top three responses: "I love you." "You are forgiven." "Welcome home."

My friends, that's what God is saying to you this morning. That's what God has said to you (clearly) in His Son. And that's the message he longs (for you to share) with a world that belongs to him.

(One final thought.) It's a bit ironic, don't you think? The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were right. "This man does welcome sinners and eats with them." And that's good news for prodigals like us. Amen.