

Sermon for September 22, 2019
2 Cor. 5: 16-21; Luke 15: 11-32
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Which One Are You?

Several years ago, when I was teaching the Gospel of Luke during a bible study, we came upon the story of the Prodigal Son, found only in this gospel. I still recall how one gentleman in the group simply could not wrap his head around the father's response to his seemingly worthless son. The story, this man declared, was just too unfair. Why should this young son who had squandered all his father's hard-earned money be welcomed back at all? What about that older brother who worked so hard and never even got a party? Why didn't good old dad just shut the door in his son's face and go split the calf with the obedient son? All very just questions, from our human perspective.

This story reminds me of Matthew's parable about the workers in the field and the landlord in which the landowner paid each one, no matter what time he came to work, the same agreed upon wage at the end of the day. If the hired hand came to work at 8 and left at 5, he got the same amount as the hired hand who showed up at 4 and clocked out at 5. We feel irked because it just isn't fair at all, by our standards. Our resistance to both parables shows us just how far we are from even beginning to gain a glimpse of understanding, and gratitude, for *God's* mercy.

Matthew Linn, a spiritual writer and counselor, says that in every aspect of our lives, we become like the God we worship. If we were taught that God is like a wrathful overlord, always watching over us to catch us in a misdeed and then punish us, we become like that toward others—suspicious, judgmental and punitive. If our experience has been that God is some far off deity who set the world on auto-pilot and has no personal interest in us, then we tend to become distant and aloof towards others. *We become like the God we worship.* Keep that in mind as I relate two stories that might help us learn and grow from today's text.

I know about a family situation where the parents paid for both their children's college educations. Their son finished college in four years with a decent grade point average, and he went on to find a good first job. His younger sister, however, had a harder time of it. She partied her way out of her first college. Then, her parents allowed her to go to a second college where she washed out again. Finally, she found a very expensive private school that seemed to offer what she needed. Her parents said, "Go for it. We'll pay your way." Although it took her some extra time, she graduated from that school with a degree in education, was offered a job, and began her teaching career.

How do you think her brother felt? Was he happy that his sister had finally settled down and found her path? No. He resented the fact that, *in his view*, she had wasted their parents' money, had taken advantage of their parents, and then had chosen a degree that wouldn't ever, *in his*

view, earn enough to justify what it cost to get it. And he resented his parents who, *in his view*, had coddled their daughter and spoiled her. He seemed to forget the fact that they had paid his way through college, first. Instead, he held a grudge against his parents for their generosity and for the decisions that they made in regard to their money and a grudge against his sister for letting them pay her way.

Now that's a story we can understand. In fact, we may even be on the side of both older sons because they are right: their parents' generosity just isn't fair. Both sons both worked hard. Both were obedient and careful with their parents' resources. Why should their troublesome siblings get any grace? The sons wanted justice, their justice, human justice.

Remember, though, that in the Prodigal Son story, the father, when he discovers his elder son is sulking, leaves the party and finds him, too, and offers him the same generous love he offers his younger son: "Everything I have is yours." In the parable of the workers in the field, the landlord asks, "I paid you what we both agreed upon. Why should you be jealous of my generosity?" In the story of the brother and sister, the parents provided for both children. So, what does it say about us that these kinds of stories make us squirm?

If I asked, which character are you?, what would be your answer? The generous father? The giving parents? The resentful sons? The repentant, changed and forgiven children? What does it say about us, people saved by the merciful grace of Jesus Christ, when we are jealous or suspicious of someone who, in our view, is not deserving of grace but who also receives it? Instead of rejoicing, we sulk. What good does holding onto resentment serve at all? As the saying goes, "Resentment is drinking a glass of poison and waiting for your enemies to die." Resentment fractures relationships and is not from God. But it is also all too human, which is why Jesus shared this parable.

As in most of Jesus' stories, there is another message here, as well: a message about being able to forgive. The father, we are told, was *watching* for his son to come home—he "saw" him—and when he catches sight of his son, the father runs to embrace him. This father, of course, represents God and reminds us of the joy we heard about when the one lost sheep is found and returned to the safe flock of ninety-nine. The father is the God who runs to embrace us, you and me—equally--when we return home and then showers us with the grace of forgiveness.

You may have heard of a woman named Corrie ten Boom, a Christian woman arrested in Nazi Germany with her family for helping persecuted Jews escape. They had furnished a room behind a bookcase where Jewish people in fear of their lives stayed until the ten Booms could find a way to get them out of the country. After the war, Corrie ten Boom wrote about her experiences in her book *The Hiding Place*. From her release from prison in 1944 until her death in 1983, she preached one theme: forgiveness. She was the only ten Boom left to preach anything, having lost her father, sister, and brother to the concentration camps.

Corrie was arrested on a day when she was suffering from the flu. When taken before the police officers for questioning, she was beaten but never revealed any details about the hiding place. Instead, she spoke about her love for the physically and mentally disabled students that she had

taught in her gymnasium for girls. When the guard asked why she should care for such people, she told him about God's love in the Bible, and how Jesus cared the most for such people.

Later, she and her sister Betsie were taken to a concentration camp with 35,000 other women. Twelve hundred women were piled in dorms meant to house four hundred. They were forced into back-breaking labor, hauling sheets of metal from one part of the camp to another and existing on two bowls of soup and one piece of bread each day. Corrie had smuggled a Bible into the camp, and each night she and her sister shared the good news with the other women in their dorm. They grew more and more in love with the loving God they worshipped.

One day, Corrie stood naked with her older sister Betsie, watching a concentration camp matron beating a prisoner. "Oh, the poor woman," Corrie cried. "Yes. May God forgive her," Betsie replied. Corrie realized that it was for the souls of the brutal Nazi guards that her sister prayed.

Another day, Betsie was cruelly whipped by a guard for not working hard enough. But she did not give in to hatred. She prayed for the guards as much as she prayed for the prisoners. "Corrie," she said, "we must tell people how good God is. No one will be able to say that they have suffered worse than us. We can tell them how wonderful God is, and how His love will fill our lives, *if only we will give up our hatred and bitterness.*" Shortly afterwards, Betsie became very ill and died; and even then, Corrie continued to teach the Bible and to preach about a loving and forgiving God.

Some time later, during roll call, Corrie was summoned to the commanding officer. When she reported, she was given a card stamped "Entlassen", which means "Released." She could hardly believe it. She was given back her few possessions, some new clothes and a railway pass back to Holland. After a long, hard journey, she arrived back among friends in her own country. Afterwards she learned that she had been released by mistake. One week after her release, all the women of her age in the camp were killed.

We become like the God we worship. After the war, Corrie worked for forgiveness and reconciliation between former enemies. At one meeting, a former SS guard who had treated her and her sister so inhumanely at the camp came up to her and asked to shake her hand. She related that for a moment she was paralyzed with hatred, but then she took his hand and suddenly realized that she was able to forgive him, not condone what he had done, but forgive him as another child of God reliant on God's grace. Does this seem fair? Are we resentful of her generosity? Her ability to bestow grace on those we might consider the least deserving? In her rehabilitation work with victims of the Holocaust and other camp survivors, Corrie Ten Boom found that only those who were able to forgive could make a true recovery and begin to live again.

We often leave forgiveness of this magnitude to God. God's big enough to forgive such horrors, not us. That's God's job, not ours. But we are wrong. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians that *we* are to be ambassadors of Christ, that God has given *us* the "*ministry of reconciliation,*" and Jesus says quite plainly that unless we forgive, no matter who it is, we ourselves will not be forgiven.

We become like the God we worship. The church has done a wonderful job of reminding us that we are sinners, to the point sometime of guilt and shame and hopelessness. The Reformation did a fine job of proclaiming our total depravity, our original sin, and painting the fires of hell for us as a place that God is quick to throw us. No wonder so many people fear God and then live in a kind of fearful and judgmental world themselves. But how often does the church remind us that not only are we in need of forgiveness, but that we also are called to be like the father in this story, that we are to be like Paul and Corrie ten Boom and be the ambassadors of reconciliation?

Is it fair for the father to forgive the young son as he did? No. Forgiveness has nothing to do with what is fair, or what the young son, or you or I, really deserve. As we are forgiven, so then can we forgive. In Betsie ten Boom's words, "We can tell others how wonderful God is, and how His love will fill our lives, if only we will give up our hatred and bitterness."

May each of us strive to become like the God we worship this day, the God who gave Corrie ten Boom the strength to forgive her family's killers; the God who granted his greatest persecutor, Paul, a second chance; the God who waits for us to return home and receive his forgiveness, and the God who waits for us to turn to those in our own lives and extend that same gift.

Amen.