

Some passages in the Bible are hard to preach because they are hard to hear. *Matthew 6 and 7* records several sayings of Jesus that make us uncomfortable, as does some from the other Gospel writers. Then there are the passages that are so familiar that preaching a fresh word is an even greater challenge. The Christ-hymn that Paul cites in his *Letter to the Philippians*, or Jesus' call to his first twelve disciples recorded in the *Gospel according to Mark*, or many of the parables in all three of the Synoptic Gospels; including our New Testament passage this morning from *Luke* – commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

I'm fairly confident that many of us here today could recite the plot line of this, the longest of all Jesus' parables. How the younger son of a successful family asks for his portion of his father's estate before his father had died; then goes off to a foreign country, squanders the funds and ends up doing the most abhorrent, degrading, unacceptable job a Jew could ever imagine – slopping hogs on a non-Jew's farm, working as a virtual slave.

I'm also pretty sure that many of us today have heard that this parable is all about the forgiveness which the younger son receives from his father when he finally returns to the family estate. This is definitely a key point that Jesus was making. So, too, is the challenge of identity that has been made over the years of hearing and studying this parable. Are we like the younger son who in his request for

Page 1

inheritance declares that his father is dead? Are we the older brother who in hurt and bitterness seems to reject his father's offer to come in and celebrate the wayward son's return? Or, are we like the prodigal father who welcomes both the younger son who was lost but now is found, and welcomes the older, faithful son who in his own way died to the joy and love of his father?

Tough questions. Makes for tough preaching, let me tell you. See, the

challenges Jesus poses to us in the parable are on many levels – I've mentioned the identity issue. There are also the unexpected twists – first, as many scholars now point out, in traditional cultures similar to that of the 1st century, it would have been more likely that the father would have either beaten the younger son or kicked him out of the house without a dime at the moment of making such a request for his share of his inheritance. Nowadays in our culture, we expect the kids to leave home – to find their way in the world, and so the shock of the unexpected request by the younger son isn't heard as loudly. Nor do we see as particularly unusual the father's granting of such a request.

Too, there is the twist in the father's welcome of both sons. The senior adult of the family, running up the road like a child to greet his wayward son. The quiet, but persistent, invitation to the older son to come join the party, but leaving the faithful child to make up his own mind. All of which makes reading, and hearing, and, for me, preaching this text a challenge.

So, let me direct you to a minor point in Jesus' parable; a trivial, technical matter, really. The question is: "Who's throwing the party?" Whose fatted calf was killed to celebrate the younger brother's return? Whose front porch did the father leap down from to run to meet the prodigal as he came back from his wanderings?

Although we see the obvious answer as the older son footing the bill – the true answer is God. For as we get wrapped up in the details of this very identifiable story of human relationships, we forget that Jesus is telling us about how life will be in the kin-dom of God. The parable of the prodigal comes after the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. And, each of these parables end with a party – a celebration of what was lost has been found.

But, perhaps what we don't see is that it's about how God offers second chances and the celebration that occurs in response.

We, again, see the obvious one — that the wayward younger son is welcomed home. Not so easily seen is how God offers a second chance to both the father and the older son.

chance to both the father and the older son.

We have come to live in a time and place where second chances are rarer than rare. Perfection is demanded, not simply hoped for, but unattainably expected from our leaders, our co-workers, our neighbors, our family members, and, yes, even our selves. A perfection that leaves no room for stumbles, missteps, or false starts. We live in a society that has little tolerance for failure of any kind or

Page 3

level. Oh, we have heard stories of business managers who lose their jobs over the failure of a new product, and coaches who don't have a blow-out winning season being fired.

Yet, now, teachers who don't produce top-tier students while facing disrespect from said students and their parents, along with a lack of support from their administrations and the community are not simply quitting — some are taking their life because of the emotional pressure! Again, we might have heard how students in Asian countries suffer major depression, even to the point of suicide, because of less than perfect scores on their exams, but we have people here in this country who are taking their life because of bullying, and/or fear of missing out (it's known as FOMO) of their perceived ideal life as they know it through social media. If there was a need for second chances, now's the time! And knowing that God is a God of second chances provides us the opportunity to experience true grace.

These parables are also about resurrection which can't be accomplished except through God. As the skeptics have consistently said, no human has ever raised himself or herself from the dead. The parable of the prodigals doesn't get all hung up on how resurrection works; it doesn't really care if the younger son expresses contrition to his father before receiving forgiveness (he never gets to say what he rehearsed); the parable doesn't resolve the remaining issues of human dynamics between the father and the older son, or the older brother and younger brother. The parable simply demonstrates on a

grand scale that there is grace — that there is to be a celebration in response, a grand scale; party in the kin-dom of God. Why? Because we have a God of second chances.

Our challenge today is to see that we in the church are living in the kin-dom of God now. To see such grace around us, through us that we are part of the party thrown by God each and every time someone returns or someone joins us. We aren't to count the cost, per se; that's not part of what second chances are really about. Our job is to be Christ-like in offering (and accepting) second chances to offer God's grace for every shortcoming, failure screw-up, botched attempt, fiasco, blunder made. Then, we can invite people to join the party, to welcome all who come in to taste and see the kin-dom of God.

N.T. Wright, the renowned British Biblical scholar, notes that the kin-dom of God is not some place beyond our daily existence; rather, that the kin-dom of God is where God's love is proclaimed and enacted, where grace abounds, overflows, where the prodigal is welcomed to the party, and the people rejoice and give thanks in the Lord.

Are you ready for **THE** party? Are you ready to step off the porch and into the house to celebrate with God now, to rejoice in what was lost that has now been found, to embrace the second chances God offers to each and every one of us in the world?

Page 5

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, You are great and beyond all comprehension in the mercy of Your love. Show us the immensity of that love as we seek to be Your agents, Your witnesses, Your people, extending grace and inviting others to Your party that celebrates the coming and unfolding of Your kin-dom on earth as in heaven, through Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

