

“Late Arrivals”

Psalm 105:1-7; Matthew 20:1-15

July 25, 2020

Last week I began closing out the summer by beginning a series on the parables. As you know, the parables are these stories Jesus told His disciples during his Earthly ministry. Each one of the parables illuminates for us some part of Jesus’ wisdom and guidance in a way that is manifest to us.

Jesus, of course, knowing our psychological make up, knew that we humans tend to be heavily influenced by stories. Stories captivate our minds in a manner in which raw numbers, data or logic simply do not. It’s quite a testament to our own ability to self-deceive but, believe it or not, facts quite frequently fail to convince or convict many people. Ah, stories on the other hand, cannot on only convince and convict people, so too can they spur them to action.

Take for example the studies which show that the percentage of people who would give \$5 to feed 500 children in a faraway country is far less that the percent of people who would give \$5 to feed one child in that same country. What changes? Well, the story. With the 500, all people are given are the details. With the one child, they’re told about Junie, a precocious 5-year-old boy who loves playing soccer, or something like that. Do you see? People are far more inclined to take action when there is context through a story.

So, it isn’t surprising, as I’ve said, that, when Jesus really, really wants to make a big, big point, he generally tells us these matters within the confines of a parable. A story.

Last week, we examined one of, if not the most, well-known parables of Jesus Christ. Coming to us from the 15th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, I speak of course of the parable of the prodigal son.

There’s a story most of us connect with quite deeply, don’t we? Told any number of ways, the story of betrayal, debauchery, despair and forgiveness captivates us no matter how it’s told.

Last week we learned that, contra Thomas Wolfe, we can go home again, fully, completely, not as just as servants, sullied by the sin we’ve debased ourselves with but as rather as fully-beloved children.

And it reminded me of a tale that I’d heard at least twice before. It’s an old pastor’s story. If you’ve heard it before, bear with me, I still think it’s worth listening to.

The story goes like this. Imagine a train steaming through hilly terrain. On board sits a Methodist pastor, looking forward to meeting his new congregation. This was in the days before air or automotive travel. Times when those itinerant Methodist pastors would only see their new church for the first time on the day that they moved into the parsonage beside it.

So there, on that train sat that Methodist pastor, himself more than a little anxious about the next few weeks of his life.

Have you ever noticed when you’re struggling with a particular emotion, how much more cognizant of it in other people?

Well, this pastor looks up from the Bible he’d been reading as the hours slipped by on board the train and sees a younger man, wringing his hands, staring intently out the train’s window.

Something makes that Methodist pastor ask the young man, “Son, are you all right?”

“Well” he says “A few years ago I left home. It wasn’t the nicest of departures. I told my mom and my dad that I never wanted to see them again. To tell you the truth, pastor,” he says, “I don’t really remember what started the fight between my dad and me.

But when it happened, I was old enough to know I just didn’t want to live in his house any longer. So, I said some terrible things to my dad. And then I left. Up and walked out of that house. I left behind a note saying that, come hell or high water, I’d never ever come back home.”

“But then, a few months ago I got so homesick that I just couldn’t stand it any longer. I think the feeling had been there all along but I’d just ignored it.

So, I wrote a note, to my Mom of course. I just knew that my dad would tear up any correspondence from me. In that note I told my mom that I’d be taking a train trip through this neck of the woods on this very day. You see, my parent’s house sits upon a hill. You can see these tracks very from the house and, when it’s clear, people on the train can see it.”

“So, I told my mom in that letter, if there’s even the slightest chance that dad will let me step foot into his house again, hang a white sheet from the clothes drying line. If I see it, I’ll know that I might be able to come home and talk with dad again. If I don’t, well then, I’ll just continue on my journey without stopping.” He said those words and you could just see the sadness hang upon his face at the prospect of NOT seeing that sheet.

“So, I’m nervous” the man confessed to the pastor. “I know that house is coming up soon. I’ve never wanted to see a simple white sheet in my life more than I do right now. Heck, I’ve never wanted to see anything more than I want to see that darned sheet.”

Now that Methodist pastor, doing what all pastors have the tendency to do, hedged a bit saying “God’s will be done.”

But now, it wasn’t just the young man looking out the window. The Pastor wanted to see how it all played out. So soon, he’s moved to the other side of the train. Soon, not only the young man but that Methodist pastor was staring out the window of the train intently, wringing their hands.

And then, as the train rounded a curve the most amazing sight sprang into their eyes. There, upon that hill, well, there wasn’t JUST a single white sheet hanging on a drying line. Rather the entire hill was covered with white sheets. The hill was as white as if a blanket of snow had fallen on that hill in the middle of summer, awash in white sheets.

The Methodist pastor, in recounting that story, said he’d never seen anyone move as fast as that young man did when they reached the station. There seemed to be nothing but air under his feet as he ran back home.

Friends, believe the Good News of the Gospel over against anything that tells you otherwise. Friends, by the grace of God, you can always go Home Again.

And, like I said, that’s a comforting story when maybe we’ve slipped back into some long-forgotten vice and can remember that the way things are aren’t the way they have to be.

But, believe it or not, tucked right behind that part of the parable of the prodigal son is, perhaps, the deeper part of the story. The point that’s a little hazier to see but, once understood, may well compel us all to take different actions.

I read now the remainder of the parable. This is what happens:

Luke 15:25-32 – “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

While the party is in full-swing, we find the elder brother sulking by himself. Hearing the revelry, he summons a servant to explain it to him. That’s when he’s told what must’ve come as shocking news – his younger brother had returned. This, of course, was the ne’er-do-well younger brother who’d told their Dad to give him his inheritance early so he could go away from him.

Yet, upon his return, this brother, this miscreant, isn’t being shunned by their Father but rather celebrated. Preposterous.

So, he doesn’t go. He’s miffed. Put-out.

And I don’t want to make it sound as if he doesn’t have some reason for being so upset.

Financially, this is a blow to him. Since the Father is receiving the Prodigal back into the full benefits of sonship, this former bad-boy would then be entitled to another percentage of his Father’s estate. Which of course, would come directly from the older brother’s expected portion. To put simply, the Elder brother at one level is upset because he’s losing money. None of us like that. But consider what he’s getting back in return—his brother. A man who wandered out of their land and wasn’t likely ever to be seen again. After all, to leave in such an ignominious way as the Prodigal son did would’ve insured his return’s likelihood was rather scant.

Yet, here is that lost brother. As someone who lost my sister a few years back, let me tell you, no amount of money is worth not getting to see your sibling any more.

But the elder brother's words likely betray an even more dark reason for his sour mood. When his father arrives to see what the elder son hasn't come to the party, the elder son complains to his Dad – “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” “

Ahh, now we begin to see something troubling about this elder son. In his exclamation we see just how like his YOUNGER BROTHER this OLDER BROTHER IS.

If you'll remember from last week, what the younger brother demonstrates is that his only concern about his Father is His Father's goods. Here, what the older brother shows is that his concern is exactly identical. He's just chosen a different way to try and get it. Whereas the younger son brashly just asks for his portion of his Dad's wealth, it turns out that the older brother's obedience and servitude was his supposed means to wealth.

Turns out, neither boys wanted a relationship with the Father, they just wanted his stuff.

Now it's important to understand who Jesus is telling this particular parable to. This particular parable comes as the final of a set of three parables in the chapter, each dealing with lostness. The Gospel tells us that “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So, what Jesus has in front of him are two groups of people, essentially – sinners and the people who rail against sinners.

Now begin to imagine how the story would've been heard by these two different types of people. One would very clearly have seen themselves as prodigal sons. The other group, well, this story, rubs a different way, doesn't it? After all, the sinners and tax collectors could imagine themselves inside the party, smelling the roast beef and dancing to the music. The elder brother though, well, he's kind of out in the cold.

The point would've been clear to those listening. Sometimes, it's the people who are doing and saying the right things are only doing so because they believe they'll get something better in the end.

It helps to know a little bit about what Pharisees and Scribes at the time were. The Pharisees were a religious group who were fervent about keeping all the Jewish laws. They made extra-careful that they were eating kosher and observing the holidays. The Scribes basically were the people who interpreted the Jewish Law and so they were invested in seeing it all upheld completely.

But, even worse, these two groups did what often happens whenever a group decides its special for what's its doing – they became prideful. Scorning others who chose not to behave as they did, the Pharisees imagined themselves superior to others, especially the very same sinners and tax collectors who were sitting beside them listening to Jesus.

And it would be one thing if it happened only in the stories but, unfortunately, this same dynamic takes place even to this day. Now look, I don't want to put too much stock in surveys which ask people why they don't come to church. After all, everyone seems to have a plausible excuse when necessary. However, I can't overlook the fact that the reason most often cited aligns with what I hear most frequently. The reason most people avoid the church is that they perceive church people as being sanctimonious. Now all that means is that a whole lot of people out there think of us as spending a whole lot of time and energy making a show of being morally superior to other people.

Ouch.

But you know what?

Sometimes the truth, even when it hurts, fits.

One of the things that can absolutely happen

In my first couple of years of ministry, I had a colleague named Mike. Mike and I came into the Presbytery together. Although we never took a class together, we knew a whole lot of the same people. Mike's a great guy and a solid pastor. His first church though, well, it was struggling. A declining membership church in an area of town that had demographically changed over the years, the church was thrilled at Mike's arrival. A young minister with a young family.

But Mike struggled at that church. By the end of his first year, Mike took another call to a church in South Carolina. We met one day and he told me what precipitated his leaving.

My friend told a story of his church. One Sunday morning, one of their members arrived for worship with three young women. All wearing dirty clothes, all a little uncouth. They were a bit loud; they fumbled their way through the order of worship. But it makes sense when you hear their story. These young women's mother is an addict and had been most of their lives. Amazingly though, these three young women kept showing up at my friend's church, week after week. Then one day, my friend announces from the pulpit that sign-ups are outside the sanctuary for the next "Ladies Supper."

The eldest daughter of this trio, a young woman in her early twenties, she signs up to come. Amazingly, they tell the young woman no. She can't come. "She's not a lady" is the determination a church committee makes. What it all boils down to is a group of people saying "we're sorry your circumstances have been bad." "We're sorry you weren't raised the way you should've been but now, well, it's too late."

Needless to say, those three young women don't attend that church any more. We'll pray for them. But I think we should pray harder for the members of that church. That they might hear the message this parable tells so powerfully.

And although that story is hopefully extreme, the fact of the matter is that we all get this one wrong from time-to-time. Sometimes, we get to thinking that it is our obedience, our dedication, our good works which set us right with God. Nothing could be a greater inversion of the Gospel. The Gospel is this – for absolutely NO reason of ours and for absolutely no other reason that the love of God, our sins have been forgiven through the saving blood our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For that reason, we stand no better (and no worse) than those sinners out there right now. We don't somehow manage to earn God's love by what we do or don't do. Instead, God loved us before the foundations of the Earth.

And it is God's love which draws us to Him. And, standing beside Jesus, we at one and the same time know both how far short of the mark we've fallen and just how majestically we are loved by God even despite of our failings.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son both comforts us and gives us cause for caution. Have we yet emerged from that foreign country where we're destitute and feeding pigs? Do we know that our Father is just waiting to run to us, kill the fatted calf and celebrate our return?

But do we also know that our relationship with God is just about what we get out of it? Do we recognize our tendency to become the older brother?

How are we finding ways to celebrate the return of all the prodigals? Better still, how are we working now to show people just how good the Father's embrace is RIGHT NOW?

Statue at Duke Divinity School – anguished Father.

What I've come to discover about myself is that, on any given day, I can be the Prodigal Son and/or the Elder Son sometimes on the very same day, strangely. Some days I find myself treading around in a faraway country indulging my dark desires. It's then I pray I remember that the father is standing, waiting for me to begin my journey home. Waiting for me to return to relationship with Him that only I've abandoned.

On other days, I look and see the sin of other people and I get miffed realizing that they're as much as entitled to our Father's Love as I am.

Chances are, you're gravitating towards one of these now.

Know this, the Father awaits your return.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.