

## God Moves . . . down the Road

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, March 27, 2022.

Psalm 32  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Jesus tells this parable in response to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about the company that Jesus was keeping. "Tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." He was welcoming sinners and eating with them! In the minds of the Pharisees and scribes, these were not the sort of people with whom a faith leader should be associating. But Jesus had a very different perspective. Tax collectors and sinners were exactly the kind of people Jesus needed to reach. They were "the lost" who needed to be found.

Most of us probably know this story as the "parable of the prodigal son," though it is sometimes called the "parable of the lost son" to parallel the two parables that Jesus tells just before it: the "parable of the lost sheep" and the "parable of the lost coin." It has also been called the "parable of the loving father," since it is as much about the father as it is his two sons.

This morning I'd like to focus on the father in this parable. His younger son is the more rebellious of the two. He didn't want to stay on the farm. He wanted to travel. He wanted to see the world. And he didn't want to wait for his father to die before receiving his inheritance. He wanted his share of the inheritance now. He was an impatient young man. The son's request for his share of the inheritance was tantamount to saying to his father: "I wish you were dead!" It probably was not the first time a child made that statement to a parent, and it certainly wasn't the last.

I can only imagine how this father must have felt to be asked such a thing by his son. Angry? Sad? Disappointed? Disrespected? Stabbed in the heart? Some fathers might have flown into a rage. Other dads might have sat down with their son for a heart-to-heart conversation. Still others might have become quiet and withdrawn and stopped

talking to their son altogether. Most would certainly have denied their son's request. Some might even have gone a step further and disowned him.

But this father does none of these things. No, this father, for whatever reason, is gracious and generous to the extreme. He grants his son's request. He gives him his share of the inheritance, no questions asked. Perhaps he hopes that his youngest will make something of himself out in the world. And if his son doesn't succeed, perhaps this father believes in allowing children to make their own mistakes and to learn from them. If his son fails to make it on his own, maybe he hopes his son will learn an important lesson from the experience.

The son takes the money and runs. He travels to a distant country and blows the whole wad living the playboy life. We don't know how much time goes by, but he ends up broke just as a severe famine descends upon the country. In desperation, he hires himself out as a servant – taking care of someone's pigs – for a Jew the worst possible occupation imaginable. He is down and out, hungry and alone. He thinks back to life on his father's farm and remembers that his father's hired servants were better off than he is now. At least they had enough bread to eat. So he resolves to return home in the hope that his father will take him back as a hired hand.

On the long journey home, you can see him rehearsing what he will say to his father: "Dad, remember when you . . . when I . . ." No, that's not right. "Father, I've got some good news and some bad news . . ." No, that won't do either. It's got to be simple and direct. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." That's it! That's what I'll say!

He makes it to within sight of his home, and notice what happens next. Before he gets to the house, before he has a chance to say anything to his father, his father sees him while he is still far away, and filled with compassion, his father runs down the road to greet his son with a hug and kiss. This father is so moved that he does what few men in his culture would have done. Men of his age and stature wore long robes and did not run in them. It wasn't dignified. But this father loves his son far more than his own dignity. He hikes up his

robes and runs down the road to greet his son and welcome him home.

The son starts in with the speech he's prepared, but before he can finish with the "treat me as a hired servant" part, his father calls to his servants: "Quickly, bring out my best robe and put it on him, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

His long lost son, who he had given up for dead, was alive and had returned. At that moment, it didn't matter what his son had done or not done. At that moment, all that mattered was that he was alive and home, safe at last. If there were lectures of disapproval to be made or recitations of lessons learned, those would come later. This was a time to celebrate the return of a lost child.

His father's reaction must have been the biggest surprise of that young son's life. After what he had done – taking his inheritance while his father was still alive, leaving his family, and squandering it all – the most he hoped for was to be treated as a hired hand. He surely did not expect his father to be happy to see him, to run to embrace him, to throw a welcome home party for him! That was beyond imagining. The text doesn't tell us how the son reacted to his father's embrace, but I can imagine him dissolving into tears in his father's arms. His father could so easily have rejected him, not even acknowledged him. So, to be received with love and compassion must have been emotionally overwhelming for him.

This parable of the loving father is a story of reconciliation between a father and his wayward son. Many see it as an allegory about God and each one of us. No matter how separated or alienated from God we may feel, no matter what we have done, even if we think we are beyond forgiveness, God longs for our return. God yearns to be in relationship with us. God stands ready to welcome us back – to run and greet us with a loving embrace. That doesn't mean that God approves of everything we do. But God does continue to love us – unconditionally. By confessing our sins, we open our hearts to God, we seek God's forgiving, loving embrace, and we find God waiting for us with open arms.

Of course, reconciliation isn't always easy. Indeed, it's often very difficult, as the elder son in the story reminds us. He wasn't happy to learn of his little brother's return. On the contrary, he was angry. His little brother left the family farm, took his inheritance with him, and lost it all in loose living. And now their father was taking this wayward son back in, welcoming him home -- even throwing a party for him! Meanwhile, the elder son had been slaving away on the farm for years, having to do the work of two sons. And he had always followed his father's commands. So, where was his reward? Where was his party? It just wasn't fair!

The father again takes the initiative, this time going out to find his eldest son to plead with him to come in and join the celebration. Just as he lavished generosity on his younger son who was lost outside the household, this father now extends his generosity to his eldest son who is lost within the household. "Son, you are always with me," he assures him, "and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." The father's love -- God's love -- knows no limitations.

Even when we squander the incredible fortune that is God's love and gamble on pleasures that never last, God does not stay stuck frozen in anger or resentment toward us. No, God runs down the road to meet us, again and again, propelled by grace.

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I was once lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come:  
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far,  
and grace will lead my home.