

Sunday, March 31, 2019  
Rev. Jessica Paulsen  
FPC, Corning  
Psalm 32  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

### God Moves...down the Road

I tell you what...these young people nowadays. They want at least 12 weeks maternity leave and paternity leave! They want vacation time...lots of it! And a shorter work week! And to work from home or the coffee shop or wherever they might feel like it! I tell you what...back in my day we didn't get any paternity leave...my kid was born, and I went right back to work 2 days later. And vacation! Who got vacation time? Sure, maybe after 20 years at one job you might get some vacation, if you're lucky. And if I didn't get any of these things when I was growing up and working and raising a family—well then, why should they?

You may or may not have been nodding your heads to this, but whether you were agreeing with it or not, you have to admit that each of these things has been said. We have to be honest and acknowledge that we have been conditioned by a culture and society that expects us to work and earn everything, and I mean everything. Oh, you want to be able to put food on the table for your children—you have to work for that. You want to have access to health care—well that's tied to your employment as well so you better work for that. Time with your family—only if you've put in your time at work first.

And the really sad part is that this way of thinking and living in the world has interjected itself into the church, into the body of Christ. Your first reaction to hearing that might be, no. We don't do things that way in the church. We understand grace and love and care are freely given to all. You don't have to earn it. Well here's just one example: in recent years churches have been very vocal in their desire for young families. Even more than that, they've been vocal in their The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

desire for employing a pastor who has a young family. If the pastor has a young family, we'll have kids in church, and more kids will come. And yet churches are one of the more vocal opponents of paid parental leave. I didn't get paid leave so why should my pastor, or our secretary, or our musicians. Besides, we can't afford to have an employee on paid leave and pay for their substitute at the same time. And on and on and on.

Our beliefs attitudes about how we function as the body of Christ have been inherently shaped and molded by the beliefs and attitudes that are held by our culture and society. This is just one example—if you want it, you have to earn it and if I didn't get it, neither do you.

Yet, then we come to worship. We step out of the culture for this time each week and come to hear about, learn about, how God wants us to live our lives. We learn about how we are to be the body of Christ in a broken and hurting world. And this week, God's Word offers to us this familiar parable, which is often known as the parable of the prodigal son.

First, the younger son goes to his father and demands that he be granted his inheritance. That may seem a little strange but as Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar, points out, “To ask, as the younger son does, for his share of an inheritance indicates a potential lack of wisdom, but it is not a sin. It was not particular unusual then, nor is it even now” ([https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-08/parable-and-its-baggage?fbclid=IwAR2OAs8PmNEeDr-XeXSmtGWMvHUsrkogWliJ\\_Vb3OfAcbjHnfyTfVdrQhXE](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-08/parable-and-its-baggage?fbclid=IwAR2OAs8PmNEeDr-XeXSmtGWMvHUsrkogWliJ_Vb3OfAcbjHnfyTfVdrQhXE), accessed March 30, 2019).

However, what might seem highly unusual is that the father gives it to him. Levine goes on to write:

Had the prodigal sinned in asking his father for his inheritance (and that is unlikely), then the father should have reproved the boy. He did not. Instead, he acquiesced. The younger The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

sons' actions may reflect negatively on his father; by failing to discipline his son and by acquiescing to his dishonorable request, the father may be seen as complicit in the son's debauchery. (Ibid)

So, the younger son dishonors his father, disappears to a far-off country, cutting himself off from the family completely, and squanders his entire inheritance.

And yet, after all of this, when the son finally returns home, his father is there, ready and waiting to welcome him. In fact, when the son is still far from the house, the father sees him, as if he's been watching for him. And this father, this man who has been dishonored and given his son everything he'd asked for only to watch him disappear, goes running down the road to him. Running. Not waiting for him to get to the house. Not slowly walking out to greet him. This patriarch of a Jewish family goes running down the road. He doesn't care who sees him or how he looks. He is running to welcome his long-lost son.

And what a welcome it is. He tells his slaves to bring out the best robe, a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. And then he tells them to kill the fatted calf! Killing the fatted calf was done only for special occasions—times when you were going to host a large group of people in celebration of something. This father is signifying not only his son's welcome back into the family but also subtly demanding the community welcome him as well. He's telling the whole world that his son is back, that he's been welcomed back into the family, and that he will be welcomed back into the community.

Now the big question—has the son done anything to deserve this welcome—has the son earned his welcome home? Because that's what culture teaches us, right? To get something like this extravagant welcome and party, you must have done something to deserve it. Except no. The only thing the son has done, besides squander all he'd been given, is to now return to his father. The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

We might say he's come to senses, realized his error, and actually returned to apologize. But it's just as possible the younger son is continuing to scheme against his father. Levine writes:

...first-century listeners may have heard not contrition but conniving. Junior recalls that Daddy still has money, and he might be able to get more. Unlike the sheep and the coin, he has not been 'found.' Rather, he recovers his true nature—he is described as 'coming to himself'—and that self is one who knows that Daddy will do anything he asks. In his planning, the prodigal and the narrator repeat the term *father*: 'laborers of my father...go to my father...Father, I have sinned...went toward his father.' Although Junior speaks of being treated as a hired hand, his repeated paternal language suggests that he still thinks of himself as his father's son. Further suggesting Junior's lack of remorse is his line, 'I have sinned against heaven and before you.' Biblically literate listeners would hear an echo of the empty words Pharaoh mouths in order to stop the plagues...The prodigal is no more repentant, has had no more change of heart, than Egypt's ruler. Homiletician David Buttrick concisely summarizes the prodigal's strategy: 'I'll go to Daddy and sound religious.' (*Ibid.*)

That's what makes this story so radical! That's why Jesus tells this parable in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling and complaining about Jesus welcoming and eating with sinners. Jesus is telling us about God's great love and grace for everyone and that it will be given freely to all. It is not something you have to work for or earn. In the great love that the father had for his son, grace was offered. In the great love that God has for each of us, grace is offered, love is offered—without conditions, without demands.

Jesus is calling his followers, he's calling us, to show the same radical love and grace to each other. Not because anyone has earned it, but because that is what it means to live as the body of Christ. And that means actually taking action to show this love and grace.

What if churches, out of God's love, offered all their employees paid parental leave? Or ensured that their employees would have vacation time to be with their families? Or actually paid attention to the research that has shown that employers who offer their employees these things—parental leave, time with family, opportunities to work remotely—actually have happier, more productive, and more loyal employees than employers who are not as generous. What if the church showed the world a new way and did these things not because people earned it—but because this is how God calls us to live in the world. God has called us to be generous—to live out of an understanding and idea of abundance—that there is enough for everyone and today I can be generous to and with you because at some point I will need you to be generous to and with me.

Generosity begets generosity. Imagine if we as the church actually embodied the life Jesus calls us to instead of absorbing the cultural attitudes. Imagine if we ran out into the world, to all the people who've lost everything, and we welcomed them and cared for them, just as the father did for his son. If we made sure they had food, and shelter, and support, not because they'd earned it, but because we love them as God loves us and then we can all join in the party together.

For we're all invited in—even the older son who is so convinced that it's not fair—this generosity that his father is showing to the younger son. He is not forgotten. As the father tries to tell his older son, you've had all of this all along. You have been experiencing my generosity, my love, and my grace for many years. So, come into the party and rejoice with me that we can now The sermon preached in worship may vary from this manuscript in scope, formulations, and content. This manuscript is intended for personal use only. Per my agreement with the Session, I retain all ownership and copyright of these works and ask that you not make copies or distribute them without my consent.

share that same generosity, love, and grace with your brother. For why would we deprive others of care or of God's grace and love and generosity just because we feel slighted?

Friends, we are called to run out into the world with open arms, being generous out of our understanding of God's abundance, not because the world has already been generous to us. We are not called to run out into the world with crossed arms and a checklist—making sure each person has earned our generosity, grace, and love. First, it's really hard to run with crossed arms. And second, Jesus has shown us another way, God's way, and that is the way of generosity, love, and grace—no matter what.