

“Compassion: Welcoming Back”
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One Great Hour of Sharing Sunday
March 31, 2019
Higganum Congregational Church
First Congregational Church of Haddam

Luke 9:28-36

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “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.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And 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!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like

a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, 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.’”

Our scripture passage was long today, and I want to be able to share a special story with you, so my own reflection will be brief. It’s really just about two words: **Rejoice** and **Compassion**.

“Rejoice with me” is what the shepherd and the woman call to their friends when their treasures are found. The same word is used for the shepherd when he finds the lost sheep. Along with “celebrate,” “rejoice” is what the father tells his resentful elder son they “had to” do at his wayward brother’s return.

The Greek for “rejoice with me” is συγχαίρω, soong-khah'-ee-ro, and means **“sharing in God's Grace.”**

And “Compassion” is what the father is filled with when his missing son comes into view returning home. In the gospels it’s the word often used about Jesus when he sees and then responds to human need: to the man with leprosy in Mark 1, two blind beggars in Matthew 20, and the widow who had lost her son in Luke 7.

That one is harder to pronounce, σπλαγγνίζομαι, splangkh-nid'-zom-ahee, but hopefully familiar to us in experience, **“to be moved in the inward parts.”**

This morning, about halfway through the season of Lent, I invite you to imagine with Jesus the speaker of parables **God’s rejoicing in us and being filled with compassion for us.**

Our impression of God our Heavenly Parent can so often be the one the Younger Son had of his Father: a potentially tolerant master if we return contrite, without expectations, willing to work off our disgrace.

We even go further: God is the one who “might strike the church with lightning if I ever came in.” It’s a funny joke I’ve laughed along with myself, but the more I think about it the more I see how profoundly it reflects not the teaching of Jesus, but the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes described in the first words of our passage. They were the ones who wanted to deny access to Jesus to tax collectors and sinners.

What Jesus taught through his stories that day is the scandal we just can’t quite grasp:

that in our failure, in our weakness, in our compulsions,
in our forgetfulness, in our ignorance, in our selfishness,
in our troubles, in our hatred, in our rebellion,
in our doubts, in our confusion, in our pride,
in our brokenness, aimlessness, and sin,

God has compassion, and rejoices to reclaim us.

Imagine the worst thing you've ever done. Please don't share aloud- what a distraction that could be!

But imagine that place where you dwelt. That time you were metaphorically supping at the pigs' trough, destitute and alone.

No matter how you may have hated yourself that day, God was passionately pining for your return home, earnestly eager for your healing, longing even on your *worst day* to welcome you back.

The frustrated older brother, the voice of *human* reason, draws an admission from the Father in the story: yes, great blessings remain for the dutiful and outwardly well-behaved as well, but it's clear to the listeners that to the extent the elder son's resentment eats away inside his heart, he is cut off from the Rejoicing inside the house of his father, unable to share the Grace.

I hope you will reread Luke 15 this week for yourself, perhaps even aloud as Jesus's stories originally were received, and meditate on where you find yourself in the stories.

This morning in my remaining time, I want to share a longer anecdote in the words of Christian writer Dr. Timothy Paul Jones from his co-authored book Proof.

Our middle daughter had been previously adopted by another family. I am sure this couple had the best of intentions, but they never quite integrated the adopted child into their family of biological children. After a couple of rough years, they dissolved the adoption, and we ended up welcoming an eight-year-old girl into our home.

For one reason or another, whenever our daughter's previous family vacationed at Disney World, they took their biological children with them, but they left their adopted daughter with a family friend. Usually — at least in the child's mind — this happened because she did something wrong that precluded her presence on the trip.

And so, by the time we adopted our daughter, she had seen many pictures of Disney World, and she had heard about the rides and the characters and the parades. But when it came to passing through the gates of the Magic Kingdom, she had always been the one left on the outside. Once I found out about this history, I made plans to take her to Disney World the next time a speaking engagement took our family to the southeastern United States.

I thought I had mastered the Disney World drill. I knew from previous experiences that the prospect of seeing cast members in freakishly oversized mouse and duck costumes somehow turns children into squirming bundles of emotional instability. What I didn't expect was that the prospect of visiting this dreamworld would produce a stream of downright devilish behavior in our newest daughter. In the month leading up to our trip to the Magic Kingdom, she stole food when a simple request would have gained her a snack. She lied when it would have been easier to tell the truth. She whispered insults that were carefully crafted to hurt her older sister as deeply as possible — and, as the days on the calendar moved closer to the trip, her mutinies multiplied.

A couple of days before our family headed to Florida, I pulled our daughter into my lap to talk through her latest escapade. “I know what you’re going to do,” she stated flatly. “You’re not going to take me to Disney World, are you?” The thought hadn’t actually crossed my mind, but her downward spiral suddenly started to make some sense. She knew she couldn’t earn her way into the Magic Kingdom — she had tried and failed that test several times before — so she was living in a way that placed her as far as possible from the most magical place on earth.

In retrospect, I’m embarrassed to admit that, in that moment, I was tempted to turn her fear to my own advantage. The easiest response would have been, “If you don’t start behaving better, you’re right, we won’t take you” — but, by God’s grace, I didn’t. Instead, I asked her, “Is this trip something we’re doing as a family?”

She nodded, brown eyes wide and tear-rimmed.

“Are you part of this family?”

She nodded again.

“Then you’re going with us. Sure, there may be some consequences to help you remember what’s right and what’s wrong — but you’re part of our family, and we’re not leaving you behind.”

I’d like to say that her behaviors grew better after that moment. They didn’t. Her choices pretty much spiraled out of control at every hotel and rest stop all the way to Lake Buena Vista. Still, we headed to Disney World on the day we had promised, and it was a typical Disney day. Overpriced tickets, overpriced meals, and lots of lines, mingled with just enough manufactured magic to consider maybe going again someday.

In our hotel room that evening, a very different child emerged. She was exhausted, pensive, and a little weepy at times, but her month-long facade of rebellion had faded. When bedtime rolled around, I prayed with her, held her, and asked, “So how was your first day at Disney World?”

She closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn. After a few moments, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. “Daddy,” she said, “I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.”

<https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-perfect-illustration-for-gods-outrageous-grace-an-excerpt-from-proof/>

Dear friends, may we rejoice in God’s gracious compassion for us and for all. Amen.