

Message: Compassion Gives Life

A father won an office game. The prize was a toy. When he got home, he called his three kids together to see which one would get the present. “Who’s the most obedient?” he asked. The children all stared at him in silence. So he asked, “Who never talks back to Mom?” Again, silence. The kids seemed to be mystified by the question. Then the father asked, “Who does everything she says?” With that question, the kids came to a conclusion. Three small voices answered in unison, “Okay, Dad, you get the toy.”¹

It’s good to have a little humor as we gather on this week of thanksgiving. There’s been so much going on in our culture and world that it’s easy to find ourselves with a negative attitude. We lose sight of what’s important – our love of God and love for others, particularly those closest to us, our family. We forget that God blessed us with family so we could bless others. My prayer is for you and your family to rediscover the things you have to celebrate. May your souls once again be centered on Jesus, who is good news for all occasions.

Last week, we began our (Re)Focus on Family series. We looked at the story of the youngest of two sons (Luke 15:11-20). Many of you know this as the story of the prodigal son. One interesting note: the word translated as “prodigal” only appears once in the New Testament. It’s translated as wasteful, extravagant, loose or riotous. It describes a way of living. A prodigal is a person who is extravagantly, recklessly or foolishly using what they’ve been given. So much so that they end up broke, with no means to live, perhaps even on the street. This is someone who can’t make it on their own.

This person ended up doing the worst job imaginable, but couldn’t live on it. In fact, he was starving! He’d be dumpster diving, but no one would let him. That’s when he came to his senses. He realized that the way he was living was worse than the way his father’s lowest paid employees were living. He needed to change his life. And here’s an important part: he acted on it. He asked for help.

¹ <http://www.cityharvestagchurch.org/obey-your-parents-joke/>

The realization that he couldn't make it on his own must have hurt more than anything! It's hard when we fail or when we find out that we can't make it on our own. It certainly affects a person's confidence and self-esteem. In fact, Luke tells us what this young man thought to himself and said to his father, *“I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your child”* (vv19, 21). So sad. That's recorded twice, giving emphasis to it! This person was truly sorry, ready to accept the consequences and make a change.

We all know people like this. We may have been that way (or still are). Our streets are filled with them. They're part of our families and our church family. Our hearts break, and will break this week, as we want a better life for them. Blended families are filled often with children who we see as prodigals, wasting the opportunities they've been give.

What are we to do? There are two responses. Jesus shows them to us. The first is the response of the father, the parent. I'll come back to that in a moment.

The second is the response of the older child. What is that? He cops at attitude. It's easy to understand. The older child is working hard, supporting the household, making sure the family's reputation is good. After a long day, he gets home to find a party going on. A party to honor the younger brother, who hasn't worked hard, divided the family and ran their reputation into the ground. (See Luke 15:25-27).

How did he respond? Jesus tells us, *“The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen”* (v28). In fact, he argued with his father, justifying his position. Does that sound familiar?

How does this apply to us? When we read the whole story, we see ourselves in the role of the younger child. We want life to be the way we want it, not as it is. We've all failed. We're frustrated, yet we keep on doing the same, self-centered things. We waste what we've been given – our time, money, spiritual gifts and blessings. And, when we find ourselves in a difficult spot, we want run to God saying, “Forgive me, I won't do it again.” Except, of course, we do. We don't really mean it. We know that. We aren't ready to change.

Then, one day, we do. We give ourselves to God. We accept Jesus. We're washed clean of our sins, renewed and given a new heart. We start learning a new way to live. We still struggle and occasionally fall, but we trust God and so, slowly and surely, we grow and mature in our faith. There's a problem though: we still want to be in control. We want things to be the way we want them. That's when we find ourselves in a new role in the family. Almost everyone in this room is in this situation.

Congratulations - you are now the older child! If this is a new realization, it may be shocking to you. The truth is: we're more likely to get angry and judge others when things don't go the way we want, than celebrate when those who are lost return to us. That happens at home. That happens in church. That happens in our neighborhoods and community. I'll talk more about the role of the older son next week.

Let me ask a question: can you remember when you got lost as a child? You were afraid. You were alone. You didn't know who to trust. It felt great when you found your parents! For those who are parents, how did it feel when you found your lost child? That's the first, best response. It's the response of a parent who finds their lost child. It's filled with love, nothing else. Jesus tells us, *“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him”* (v20).

The son apologized and said what was on his heart, *“I've sinned. I no longer deserve to be your son”* (v21), but the father wasn't hearing it. The father dressed him, restored him and invited the whole household to celebrate. They threw a party with dancing, singing and good food.

The role Jesus invites us to become is the role of the parent.

It doesn't matter whether you're the biological parent of a child or not. It doesn't matter when you're a grandparent. It doesn't matter whether you've adopted a child or are a foster parent. It doesn't even matter whether you've never had children. Jesus invites all of us to become spiritual parents. That has nothing to do with age, gender, income or any of the things we use to separate ourselves. What's important is for us to have a heart for those who are struggling with life, those who have no spiritual life.

I believe there’s nothing more important in the world today. Jesus is inviting us to live as spiritual parents in a world filled with lost people. There are many who don’t know any other way to live. They’re hurting, broken, stressed out and don’t know how to make ends meet. They’re unhappy at work, unhappy at home, unhappy with life. They don’t know where to turn. They don’t have a relationship with God.

Here are a few facts from the last U.S. Census report: 12% of the people who live in Corona live in poverty. 17% in Riverside County; 1 in 5 people are in need. 15% of children under 18 in Corona live in poverty.² Less than 10% of the population goes to church. We can do better. While our work begins at home and at church, Jesus calls us to leave the building and go out to our neighbors, make new friends and help them find a spiritual home while assisting with their physical needs. We all know what it feels like to be lost, lonely and afraid. We can help.

What does it mean to be a spiritual parent? Jesus shows us.

First, parents see. We look for others. We see them with God’s eyes, with eyes that are loving, not afraid or angry. That’s the kind of seeing that reaches out to all of humanity. It’s the kind of seeing that understands what it means to be lost, without hope. We look past the clothing – fancy or hand-me-downs or worn and dirty. We look past their home – mansion or apartment or cardboard box. We look past their transportation – the latest new car or beater or bus or shopping cart. We look past the material things and see what’s inside, their soul. That’s the treasure!

When we do, we find the greater part: parents have compassion.

We feel the suffering of those who have no place to go. We cry oceans of tears when others go through agony and anguish. Our heart burns with an immense desire to bring the lost ones home. How often we want to talk to them, warn them of the dangers, convince them that home is the place where they can find what they’re so desperately searching for. We want to pull them back and hold onto them so they won’t get hurt.

² <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

But the love of a parent is to be too great for any of that. Our love can't force, constrain, push or pull. Parents offer the freedom to reject our love or to love in return. Parents wait patiently, welcome openly, love freely and let go willingly.

How can we do that? God shows us. God, the creator of heaven and earth, has chosen to be, first and foremost, a parent. Jesus, God with us, wants all of his children to be free, free to love. That freedom includes the possibility of leaving home, going away and losing everything. God's heart knows all the pain that will come from that choice, but love makes God powerless to prevent it. That's the power and nature of compassion.

True compassion comes when we let the wrongs of our children and others break our hearts. The lust, greed, anger, resentment, jealousy and vengeance of those who are lost grieves us. We feel their pain. This grief becomes deeper as our hearts become purer. We're made more perfect in love. But there's joy too, for in that deep, inner place where love embraces all human grief, God's love reaches out. The touch of God's hands are the ultimate act of compassion. They radiate with inner light. They seek only to heal. We are God's ambassadors. Our hands and feet are those Jesus uses to touch others, embracing and healing.

Here's the Jesus I want to believe in: a God who, from the beginning of creation, is stretching his arms out to us with mercy, never forcing anyone, but always waiting. A God who never lets his arms drop in despair, but always hopes that his children will return so he can speak words of love. God's only desire is to bless us.

God has no desire to punish the lost. They've already been excessively punished by their own inner or outer waywardness, our demons. God simply wants them to know that the love they've searched for in such distorted ways has been, is, and will always be there for them. *“You are my beloved, on you my favor rests.”* Jesus is our shepherd, *“feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms and holding them close.”*³

³ Material drawn from Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Doubleday, 1992, pp. 94-96

Jesus invites us to become parents to others in the same way he is a parent to us. When we live that way, others will see. Mercy will come to life. Forgiveness, reconciliation and healing will come together and, in this way, tired children, worn-out parents and angry siblings will find rest.

The invitation Jesus gives isn't easy. It means we have to put our own concerns, hurts and ego aside. We have to grow and mature, spiritually. We have to empty ourselves. It's not easy. But it's what our families, neighbors, church and world need. When we do, we'll be filled with a love and compassion that will give us a life we've always wanted – each and everyday. We'll have something to look forward to every day. And for that, we'll be truly grateful.

Let us pray ...

Gracious God, we come to you as your children, made in your image. We need your grace and mercy, yet we struggle to get past our own interests and desires. Fill us with a spirit of compassion. Free us from urgency, show us how to love others freely, willingly and patiently. Give us the courage to turn away from self-destructive attitudes and behaviors, embracing the new way of life you give. Help us to truly follow you, no matter what it may cost, so that we may live and care for others in your name. In Jesus' name, amen.

Luke 15:18-24, 31-32 (CEB)

I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.” ’ So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate....

Then his father said, “Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.”