

“The Love-Sick Father” by Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner  
Isaiah 49:13-16a Luke 15: 1-3, 11-end of chapter

The two scriptures we heard this morning both bear witness to the very heart of the gospel. They tell us that God loves each and every one of us with a love that is both powerful and personal; that our name is carved on the palm of God’s hand...

I love the image of our names being written on God’s hand, because as some of you know, I routinely write on my own hand. When I REALLY need to remember something, and I can’t risk misplacing a slip of paper, then it goes into my most failsafe system, and gets written on the back of my hand. If I’ve written it there, I know I won’t lose the detail, and will tend to it that day. Of course, one day this week I couldn’t read what I had written on my hand, and that unsolved mystery is still haunting me...but I guess that’s where the analogy breaks down. What I really want to say is that scripture tells us that God, too, writes the really important stuff on the Divine Hand...and apparently the really important stuff is...your name and my name. It’s as if each morning, God gets up and says, “The one thing I most want to accomplish today, is to BE THERE with Judy...to BE THERE with Pete and Janis and Fred and Deborah and Cindy...to BE THERE ...with YOU.” And because God is God and not human, God can do this with all six billion of us as if we were the only ones here. And, Oh, if we truly accepted and internalized this kind of love, how our lives and world would change!

It is said that a traveler came across a monk who was sitting by the side of the road in prayer. After conversing awhile, it came out that the monk spent hours each day in prayer, just basking in God’s love. The traveler said, “You must be very close to God.” At that, the monk smiled, almost coyly, and said, “Well, yes, God IS very fond of me.”

Now this may sound corny or even silly to the mainline, modern ear, but I believe we need to discover or rediscover this sense of God’s love and abiding presence in our daily lives. We need to reconnect with the God who first loves us, not because of what we do or don’t do. We

need to quiet the distractions and bask in God's abiding love. God's love was there for us before we could do anything to earn it, while we were being knit together in our mother's womb. And its there, says the parable of the Prodigal, even in the midst of our most dramatic failures, our most spectacular Swan Dives off the High Road, or our subtler driftings away from our best selves, into more socially acceptable kinds of dissipated living.

And so I'd like to focus today on the familiar parable that we call "The Prodigal Son." But I think a better title would be one that is suggested by several of the commentaries, as "The Loving Father" or even more poignantly, "The Lovesick Father." Because it seems to me that's where the real story is. It's in the image of that Father standing outside the house, scanning the horizon, peering down the road, longing and praying and waiting for a glimpse of the estranged child. (Incidentally: I believe that's how God waits for us to turn to God in prayer every day as well.)

We must remember, first of all, that when the prodigal son left home, he couldn't have done so in a more hurtful manner. In saying, "Father, give me my share of the property that WILL SOMEDAY belong to me..." he was really saying, in the parlance of that culture, "Listen Old Man, I frankly consider you dead already. What I've really always wanted is just your money anyway, so why don't you save us both a lot of time-biding, cough up now, and I'll get out of here..." Furthermore, once this Jewish Kid gets to "The Far Country" and blows his inheritance in record time, where does he go to try to scratch up some cash or at least some grub? To a gentile's PIG FARM! Not only did he squander the family's money, not only did he do so in as personally hurtful a way as possible to his own Father, but he seemed to go out of his way to extend the insult to his entire faith and culture by rejecting all things held sacred to the wider community. Indeed, in telling this particular parable, Jesus could hardly have made the younger son more unworthy to forgive, nor could he have found any better way to shock the pharisees, who were the ones to whom he was targeting this story. Its as radical and offensive a story for the pharisees to hear as it could possibly be.

And yet, still, Jesus portrays that Father as peering down the road, heartsick with longing for his boy to appear. And when finally, finally, he catches the glimpse he's been waiting and praying for...he RUNS to meet him. He throws his arms around him even before the son has a chance to utter a word of apology! This image, too, leaps to life when we understand that in ancient Palestine, men did not run because it was considered an affront to dignity. But that Father wasn't thinking about dignity or the family fortune, or about his religion or even about what would have been his legitimate right to be angry. All he could think of was reunion...getting to his boy, hugging him, kissing him, and welcoming him back home.

So I think that the first thing this parable tells us, very simply and perhaps obviously, is that God loves us like that, even in the midst of our most egregious failures, and that forgiveness is always there if we'll just reach out and accept it. Of course this doesn't make sense to the older brother, or to the "Older brother" part of each one of us. It's radical and even unfair by the standards of the world. Just like its totally unfair in the Parable of the Laborers where those who work only an hour get paid as much as the ones who worked all day. It was indeed offensive to the Pharisees who heard these parables; the Pharisees, working so hard, dotting every "i" and crossing every "t" to earn God's love. And it's still offensive to the inner Pharisee in each of us, but there it is. I'm sorry. I can't sanitize it for you or me. There Jesus goes again with that radical, unfair GRACE! He goes out of his way to make it clear...Performance and good behavior may have their place...but they are not effective in EARNING God's love, because God's love is already there before all that. Your name was written on the palm of God's hand before you could perform or achieve anything, and even the most egregious failure won't get God to erase it...

Paul Tillich, in his famous sermon "You Are Accepted" put it this way: "Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does NOT mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the savior, or that the Bible contains the truth...Nor does it mean that we are making progress in our moral development or our fight against special faults, or our contribution

to society. (Those things) may be the fruit of grace, but are not grace itself. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless an empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, perhaps because we have violated a life we love. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes, at that moment, a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for that name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything. Do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! After such an experience, we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But somehow, everything is transformed."

You see, once we truly know that level of deep, underlying grace, we can give up the posture of always having to defend ourselves and prove ourselves and justify and rationalize and be so perennially and infernally RIGHT all the time. Indeed, says writer Peter Van Breeman in his book As Bread That Is Broken, the mere fact that we defend and justify our mistakes so dogmatically, is a sign that we do not yet fully believe in God's love, and have not yet fully internalized the reality of grace.

So, if the first thing this parable does is remind us of God's gracious love for us, even in the midst of our failures, then the second thing it does is to remind the Pharisees, or older brother inside each one of us, not to dismiss our own perhaps "subtler sins" too quickly. If we do, we just might just find ourselves out in the cold ourselves, not because God will banish us there, but because our own judgmentalness will. Van Breemen makes the point that, in a way, neither of these sons was any great prize. The younger one only "came to himself" after he got good and hungry, and even though the words in the story imply that his conversion was sincere, we really

can't be sure of it, nor that he won't relapse in the future. But here's the irony: the older son, despite the fact that he never left home, was really lost in a far country, too. Indeed, he may have been in a less obvious far country, but that is precisely what made it so dangerous. Some of us know that when you live in your own head, you occupy a very dangerous neighborhood, because you can get trapped in the self-feeding loop of your own, compulsive thinking. And at that point, you have ceased to use your mind in the way God intended, and your mind has started using you! And so the older brother seems to be living inside the tedious and lifeless "Department of Weights and Measures" where it was all about his opinions, his comparisons, his judgments, his principles and his rules. He was right out in the back yard, but further from the warmth of his father's love, and from the party that was going on inside, than if he had sinned boldly and traveled to the pig farm himself. It's a dangerous way to live precisely because we do not recognize it as dangerous. We can stay outside, and wrap ourselves up in the blanket of our self-righteousness and our "I told you so's." But this land of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness is just as empty and dissipated a way to live as in the other "Far Country." And what we don't understand when we're out back alone, with only our self-righteousness to keep us company, is that inside the house, the sinners who failed so obviously that they cannot pretend anymore, have turned it around. Further, THEY are at the party, and having a wonderful time, because at that party, grace and love are flowing freely, and everybody knows that we all take turns being the forgiver and the forgiven, and that being wrong is not the end of the world, and that loving and being loved by God is not as grim and serious as the Pharisees make it.

Ultimately, it's relationship that the Father most wants with both his kids anyway. There's a time and a place for work and accomplishment and even honest talk about resentful feelings. But none of that can happen unless there is connection, and relationship, and the assurance of forgiveness no matter how dramatically or insidiously we may fail each other.

Frederick Buechner says this, "When somebody you've wronged forgives you, you're spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. And for both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence."

The Father, who has both sons' names written on his hand, is GLAD of their presence. He wants nothing more than to convince them each of how dearly he loves them. And by the end, the younger son seems to be getting it. As to the older son, we don't know. We aren't told if the older son was able to return from his own, internal "far country" and come inside. One commentary suggests that Jesus intentionally left that question unanswered because each Pharisee who heard this story that day had to answer it with his own life. Indeed, The older brother part inside each of us must answer the question as well. And there are no guarantees. The younger brother may let us down again. But Jesus seems to suggest that it is still better to err in the direction of forgiveness, and forgive seventy times seven times if need be, not only because it is good for our brother, but because if we don't, we'll be consigning ourselves to our own "far country" of resentment and judgment and pecking orders.

And isn't it maybe time to drop all that? To just let it go, and come inside the party? Whichever brother or you are, or have ever been, the Lovesick Father is waiting and watching.