

BGO Sermon for 8-21-16 – God’s Story, My Story, Our Story: Younger Son

We’ve been in a series of “getting to know the Pastor” sermons, connecting some of my life stories with stories from the Bible, because when you get down to it, all of our stories are part of God’s story, the story of God’s love poured out to us through His Son Jesus. We’re actually going to start a series within a series, taking a few Sundays to look at a parable that Jesus told, a parable rich in depth & meaning, a parable all of us have lived in - the parable of the Prodigal.

You notice I didn’t say the story of the Prodigal Son, though that certainly fits the younger son often given that title. You see, the word “prodigal” means excessive, extravagant, lavish even. So by that, many in the parable are prodigal in their actions.

This parable, or at least the first part of it, is familiar to most people, even those who don’t know much of the Bible. On the surface, it’s pretty basic: an ungrateful son demands money from his dad, runs out and blows it, comes back home, & out of love the father forgives him & takes him back in. But there’s so much more here!

You may have heard from other preachers that by asking for “what he had coming,” his inheritance, the younger son was saying, in effect, “Dad, I wish you were dead.” He may have been angry with Dad, even blamed him for the bad stuff that happened to him. But I’m not so sure that the kid really cared that much; he’s just after the stuff. I read the Greek there, & I see the son saying, “I’ve got my own plans, my own wants - got places to go, things to do. So Dad, I want what’s coming to me, & I want it now!

And isn’t that what we’re like when we’re rebellious runaways from God; we’re good people, we deserve the good stuff - or we’ve done without long enough, we want our fair share - so we want what’s coming to us, and now, not later. & yes, sometimes we’ll blame God for the bad stuff, but most of the time it’s indifference; it’s OK if God is out there, as long as God doesn’t bother us, until the next time we need something.

At least that was me in college. I was living proof that there is prayer in school; before every big test, I’d be praying! “God, you get me through this, & I’ll be in chapel every week.” & as I look back, I see that God kept his part of the bargain, though I rarely did.

So, the young, impetuous and now wealthy young man in Jesus’ parable goes out into the world, and dives headlong into sin; then again, he was already in sin when he turned from his father.

Despite our trying to complicate or avoid the issue,
figuring out what is a sin in our lives ends up being fairly simple.
The Greek word in the Bible for sin is the word HAMARTIA,
an archery term that means “missing the mark”.
God wants to be at the center of our lives;
being more like Jesus is God’s desire for us.
So if something moves us away from God,
if it makes us less like Jesus, then that is sin.

The younger son in the parable dives headlong into the sin of the world.
And as the world does, it takes what we have, and when we are used up,
it tosses us aside.

The young man soon finds himself destitute, with only the pigs for company.
Don’t miss the depth that he fell. This kid was so useless as a servant, he ends up
working for the worst boss in the world, one who wouldn’t even give him pig slop;
folks, if you’re serving yourself, if you’re serving your bank account or checkbook,
if you’re serving the world, you end up a servant of sin - worst boss in the universe.
And he ends up covered in the filth of the pigpen:
the most unclean part of the most unclean animal in Jewish tradition.
The most unclean of the most unclean: that’s sin. And that scent of sin clings to us.
It wasn’t that long ago that Amy and I were driving to the Quad Cities,
and we drove past a hog farm. We smelled it before we saw it. And that...scent...
lingered in the vehicle much too long for us. In that same way, sin clings to us -
in our thoughts, in our attitudes, in our responses to others.

The world tells us that anything we do is OK as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else.
The thing is that sin does hurt; it hurts us & it hurts others. Most importantly,
it has an impact on our relationship with God; it’s like Paul wrote in Romans:
sin disturbed relations with God in everything & everyone. In even stronger words,
sin put crowds of people at the dead-end abyss of separation from God,
The impact of sin is more profound than we imagine, or care to think about.

A quick personal story: when I was in Junior High,
the band played at a prestigious band director's conference up in Chicago.
We were setting up in this huge auditorium
filled with people from all over the state.

The band director was constantly shushing us, making sure we were quiet
as we set up behind the curtains. We were just about ready for the curtains
to be opened when I grabbed for a cymbal and crash, it fell to the floor.
I mean, the echo of that thing lasted for years. They must have heard it in Indiana!

Folks, that's what sin is like to God. It's like this big, loud, ugly cymbal crash in the middle of the most beautiful part of God's symphony.

Picture the worst scene of violence that you've seen on the TV news, then multiply it by the number of people that have ever lived; that's the picture that sin puts in front of God.

I can't say it strong enough, GOD HATES SIN.

Now, the Bible doesn't say that the younger son cleaned up before he went home. The good news, for him and for us: he didn't have to.

As much as God hates sin, God loves us even more.

God continues to want a deeper, more loving relationship with us, despite our sin.

And God will keep on seeking that relationship with us

each and every time we foul up, working in our lives to bring us back.

Because all of our sins are covered by God's Grace.

I've loved that Romans passage in the Message paraphrase since the 1st time I heard it: *But sin didn't, & doesn't, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down.*

All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life—a life that goes on and on and on, world without end.

When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down: its aggressive forgiveness.

That's what we see in the response from the father to his prodigal son.

The son doesn't have to make his presence known;

Scripture tells us that the father saw him from a long ways off -

that means the father had been looking for him to come home, never stopped looking, never stopped seeking.

The son doesn't have to come to the door; the father runs to him.

The son doesn't get a chance to make his speech;

the father is already making preparations to celebrate the homecoming.

And the part that stuck out to me: the father ran out, embraced him -

in the Greek, the father literally "fell on his neck and kissed him."

You know what that meant? The people Jesus was talking to would have.

Out of the incredible love the father had for his child,

he stuck his nose in his son's neck,

breathing in the most repugnant stench a Jew could imagine.

The father kissed his son's filth-covered neck,

then made a way for the son to be made clean with new clothes, re-covered.

Folks, that's what God does with us, if we're coming to him the first time or the hundredth: out of love he embraces our sin-covered lives, cleanses us from all unrighteousness, and clothes us in Christ.

Christ is a living demonstration of that. Jesus embraced our life by taking on our flesh, spending the wealth of His Father's love on a world that would try to use him up. And in that ultimate act of love, he breathed in the sin of all humanity, holding his breath until on the cross, he exhaled, "It is Finished." He's gone back to His Father so we can go back, and when this life is over, we can celebrate the return of all the prodigal sons & daughters at God heavenly banquet.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid, Paul would say! Why would we want to respond to God's love by making God put up with that? The Holy Spirit gives us power to resist sin's power over us, that we might live more and more in righteousness. But if we sin, when we sin, we can have the assurance that we can keep coming back to our Father God, whose love goes beyond our understanding.

And my younger brother story? I was in my mid-twenties. I was married with kids, and living in Davenport. I had been attending a United Methodist church nearby, mostly because that was what a man my age was supposed to do to be a good husband and father; it was another part of that middle-class American dream.

The church held a revival every year, & I reluctantly accepted the invitation to attend, just to keep up appearances. During the revival, the evangelist spoke of the God-shaped hole that everyone had, the one only God can fill. I could actually feel the hole in my chest. And when the offer to come forward was made, to accept Jesus as Savior, you know what I did? Absolutely nothing! I stayed glued in my pew; I was afraid of showing myself a fraud, and afraid of the demands God might make of me.

Did I mention that this revival was a yearly occurrence? These feelings worked on me for a year, until the evangelist returned, and again I found myself at the revival. I prayed for God not to make me come forward. The altar call came, as I knew in my heart it would, and again I stayed put. Then, the evangelist announced that some were not coming forward, and he invited everyone there to pray together "the sinner's prayer" that prayer to accept Jesus as Savior, right where we were sitting. I didn't have to go forward, I didn't have to get an extra dose of courage, I didn't have to get fixed.

God was waiting for me with open arms, no strings attached. That night I accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord.

It's like the quote I posted on our BGO Facebook page: *“Waiting to come to the Lord when you get your life cleaned up is like waiting to go to the ER when you stop bleeding. He doesn't love some future version of you; He loves us in our mess.”*

Folks, come home! There's no need to stay in the pigpen.
You don't have to clean up first; you don't have to rush to the altar while we sing “Just As I Am” for the 43rd time for just one more sinner to come forward.
God loves us in our mess; He continues to run to us, seeking us out, inviting us back. Just come home, and let the Father do the rest.

*“Dear Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness.
I believe you died for my sins and rose from the dead.
I trust and follow you as my Lord and Savior.
Guide my life and help me to do your will. In your name, Amen.”*