

Title: I once was lost but...
Text: Luke 15.20b-24
Theme: The mercy of God welcomes the repenting.
Series: Luke
Argument: My aim is to convince estranged believers or unbelievers to come home because repentance is the opportunity for God to show off his mercy.

One of Rembrandt's most famous paintings is The Return of the Prodigal Son. This masterpiece oil painting that is on display in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia where he seeks to capture the moment that the father embraces his son. This scene is full of emotion and Rembrandt's use of light and shadows is phenomenal. Most of us have a deep connection to this scene. Some of you long to open your arms and receive a long-lost son or daughter. Some of you long to be received like that and can only grieve that you do not or did not have a dad like that. Art historians say that Rembrandt painted himself as the prodigal son. But as good as this painting is, and it is, this text, this story, this account that Jesus told is so much more so.

Read Text:

We need to read this parable as the original audience heard it. 1st century Jewish culture, like many middle eastern cultures was/is heavily influenced by fear, honor and shame. Kids fear bringing shame on their families. If someone shames your family, severe punishment is meted out to restore honor to the family name. That is how the system works and you threaten your kids with banishment or worse if they harm the reputation of you or the family. Fear and shame are powerful links to keep people on a tight chain. It's like your family is the mafia. It's all about appearance. Whatever you do, do not show weakness. Look tough, don't smile.

So, this younger son arrogantly and offensively demands his portion of his inheritance. The people listening to Jesus are stunned. They cannot believe the insolence. However, their anger at this ingrate only sets them up for a plot twist they never imagined. The son, crushed by the consequences of his sin is finally coming home, however, no one knows it. The son has no way of getting word to his dad that he is coming and has no way of knowing how he will be received. In the speech that he prepared he plans to tell his dad that he has sinned against God and his dad, that he is no longer worthy to be called your son and (here is the clincher), "*Treat me as one of your hired servants.*" A bondservant was someone who was actually a member of the estate and was a permanent part of the organization. The prodigal son was not asking for that. He was asking to be treated as a hired servant or a day laborer. This would be someone who had no permanent standing but was hired on an as-needed basis. It was the lowest position. As humbling as this is, those listening to Jesus could only assume that this Father would still be enraged at the shame and dishonor his son caused him and given the power dynamic with everything on the side of the father, we would expect the Father to respond with humiliation, and most likely not be willing to see him. "If I was dead to him, then he is dead to me." So, here is what we would expect. The son comes back. He grovels on the ground, begging a servant to get word to his dad that he is back. The Father is informed and now, we wonder just how harsh his response is going to be. That is what we expect. That is what powerful men did if

they expected to hang on to their power. Look tough, don't smile and don't cry. We brace ourselves for his response but the story doesn't go like we think. Look at the beginning of v.20. *And he arose and came to his father.*" The next word is not "so." The next word is "but." Jesus is surprising us. He surprises us by telling us that ...

1. The Father doesn't do what we assume. (20b)

Look at how Jesus describes the actions of the Father. *"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him."*

A. The father was looking.

The father saw him. From a long way off, the father saw him, which means that the father was looking for him. You stop looking when you give up hope. But you look when you have hope. When our youngest was coming back from deployment in Afghanistan. Cathi and I were desperate to see her. Many of you know what I am talking about. We arrived at the base way ahead of time to get as close as we could to the front. We waited forever and then we heard the plane coming in. We strained to see her. But we were there because we were told she was coming back. But this dad? He was looking, not because he knew but because he didn't give up hope. But that is hard. When you hope and you look and you wait and you hear nothing, or you hear, "no" then the pain only happens again and you wonder how much rejection can a person endure? Have you given up on anyone? Have you stopped looking? Stopped praying? It is not easy to hope, in fact, you can't do it on your own. You need the love of God to fuel you and sustain you. Has anyone given up on you? Aren't you glad God didn't? What kind of a heart did this father have that caused him to hope and keep looking for his son? This father displayed our Father. He had a heart of mercy. So, when he saw the son he was looking for...

B. The father felt compassion.

Many of you are tempted to think that God simply tolerates you or that he lives with a baseline frustration with you because you just can't seem to get it together for any length of time. This kid blew it up about as badly as anyone could and the father's heart is lit with fire for his son. He is moved by his affection for him. Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe in what Jesus says? Do you believe that Jesus is accurately describing the Father? Do you believe that your forever Father loves you? He is so emotional that he forgets himself. In v.17 the son, "came to himself," but here the father, in a sense, forgets himself. He forgets his dignity because his dignity is overruled by his mercy. Grown men like him don't run. But this father runs.

C. The father ran.

If you are in the gathering space after the service and you see a couple of boys running, you are not surprised. Kids love to run. However, if one of our esteemed elders, like Joe or Bert or Laurence went tearing down the hall, we would be startled. We not only do not expect that, but we've never seen that. The servants are startled. They've never seen this before! What is going

on? This man is running, yelling (likely), panting, sobbing and with his robe and attire waving in the breeze, he runs to his son and by running to his son, he just informed his house of how this son is to be seen and treated, but he wasn't done.

D. The father embraced him and kissed him.

The father literally fell upon his neck. The son didn't even have a chance to say anything yet. All of this time he was wondering how he was going to be received. Now he knows. And beloved, you do not have to wonder, how you will be received. Jesus is describing the Father. This is what God is like. Our repentance does not put us on probation. God's mercy is on a hair trigger that is tripped by our repentance. In fact...

2. The Mercy of God invites repentance. (21)

You know what it is like. You have a tense meeting coming up, so you plan your words and try to anticipate what they are going to say. You line up your points, arguments, and in some cases rehearse it. You do not know how it will be received, or even if you will be believed.

An attorney friend said his granddaughter got her first speeding ticket, so, of course, she called him. I laughed. Did she want grandpa to go to court with her? He told her that he wouldn't do it. She needed to go by herself. No parents, no attorney, just her. And she needed to tell the judge what she did was wrong, she is sorry and has learned her lesson. What if she goes into court and before she even has a chance to say anything, the judge recognizes her as this attorney's granddaughter and then goes on to tell her what a great man and good friend he is? And then says, "what can I help you with?" She'd be a little more at ease to confess, right?

Well, here, the son is being smothered by his father, and the mercy that has greeted him, invites him to repent, which he does, with words. Look back at the middle of v.18, where the son has decided to return and is rehearsing what he plans to say. "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.*" There are 3 points he makes with that planned speech. Now, look at what he actually says in v.21. "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. (point 1) I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*" (point 2) What happened to point 3? Here comes the 2nd shocker.

3. The father doesn't say what we assume he will say. (21-23)

Again, if this story was going like we would assume, Jesus would have said, "So the father said to him..." But he doesn't say "so" instead he does a mic drop on us. "But the father said to him." What just happened? The father interrupted the son's speech that he had rehearsed. My guess is that the son was going to say, "treat me as one of your hired servants" but as soon as he said that he was not worthy to be called your son, his father cut him off because that was simply not an option. For a second time, Jesus surprises us, this time with what the father says.

A. The father said to bring the best robe. (quickly)

The boy needed some clothes, but this was more than just getting him something decent to wear. The father wanted him dressed in the best robe. This was formal attire. And do it quickly. But he wasn't done.

B. The father said to put a ring on him.

Why a ring? The ring likely contained a seal or a symbol of the family name. Wearing this would identify him as being a full member of the family. His acceptance and his restoration to his standing as a member of the family is immediate. What had the son just said? *"I am no longer worthy to be called your son."* So, what does the father do? He has him dressed in the best robe and has the family seal put on his finger removing all doubt as to how the father viewed him and what his standing is. But again, he wasn't done. Get him some shoes! Think sandals.

C. The father said to put shoes on his feet.

Many people did not have coverings for their feet. A person with sandals had standing. It was not a necessity, but more of a luxury. For the son who went overboard in his rebellion, the father is going overboard in his restoration. Again, the father is not done. Next...

D. The father said to kill the fattened calf.

The family estate centered on agriculture. The property involved fields, so there were likely crops and some animals. This detail is something that most of us do not appreciate. If we are going to get some ribs, or turkey, or ham for Thanksgiving, we go to the store, where those things are sold. That's not the case here. There was a calf that was being raised in order to be eaten. It was being fed so it would be fat. It is possible that they did this to be ready for big feast days like the day of atonement or other occasions and if so, the calf was convenient to be made ready for a surprise party.

Let's stop for a minute because this might help us see something. The calf was already fattened and ready to be the main entrée. Not only that, but there was a robe, the best one, that was ready too, along with a ring and a pair of sandals. It is like the father was ready for this moment. He was prepared to receive his son. He was ready to welcome him and forgive him because at some point, he had already forgiven him in his heart. That's weighty, isn't it? Think about the person you are estranged from. Your phone rings and you recognize who it is. Your phone buzzes and you get a text asking if you could talk. Do you let it go to voicemail? Do you not respond while you try to figure out what to do? Hey, your son is outside wanting to know if you are willing to talk. I don't know. Tell him, sorry. We've moved on. He's got to figure it out on his own. Or, tell him to come back later, maybe next week. I've got to think about this. The father did not have to think about it in the moment because he had already thought about it. He had already forgiven his son in his heart and was ready to forgive him and restore him as soon as the opportunity came about and there was nothing stingy about his forgiveness. Then...

E. The father said to eat and celebrate.

It was uncommon to eat meat at a meal, so this was a lavish party. And it's not like they ordered door dash and had a meal 25 minutes later. This was an event that would have taken hours to prepare. Musicians were called for, people were invited, this was indeed a special celebration and for a moment, it seemed, all was again right with the world.

In those moments when the family is around the table and someone is telling a story, or laughing at a memory, or we're playing a game together, I like to try to take it all in and hold it as long as I can. This is gold. Those moments make everything that we went through to have those moments, worth it. Return, repentance, reconciliation, reunion, and restoration are all being displayed and celebrated in this such a wonderful event. And I'm guessing that the father, just stopped and listened to the laughter, the music, and watched the smiles and took in the joy. It was everything that he had hoped and planned for.

Beloved, this is our God. This is his heart. The Pharisees and Scribes were offended at Jesus because they did not know God. They represented a false god. They had deep convictions and they were very committed to their convictions, but their convictions were absolutely dead wrong. Our God is merciful. Therefore,

4. Repentance is the opportunity for God to show off his mercy. (24a)

The father tells us why he is throwing the party. "*this my son* Do you see it now? "My son" God identifies himself with those who repent and claims them as his child because repentance is the opportunity for God to show off and celebrate his mercy and God's mercy is seen in forgiveness and restoration. My son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. How can God be like this? Is he just a sentimental old sap who is a sucker for sob stories and people down on their luck? Oh no. God's mercy is rich and deep, but not cheap. His mercy to you comes at the cost of his own Son for you. God can be merciful to you because he wasn't merciful to his Son. Jesus took our justice. Jesus bore our sin, that is he took the punishment on himself that our sin deserved. By dying in our place he satisfied the perfect justice of God, so that you could experience the lavish mercy of God.

Some of you need to admit that you cannot pay for your own sin and you need Jesus to pay it for you. You need to come home to God and experience this mercy. Others of you who have lost sight of your Father, need to come home and be restored. For all of us, every day is another opportunity to show mercy or to be prepared to show mercy. If you have been forgiven much, then you will love much. If you have been the recipient of mercy, then you will want to show mercy. There are people who have hurt you or left you and you may have written them off. Aren't you glad God didn't do that with you?

5. Repentance is the opportunity for the church to echo heaven. (24b)

Jesus said that the rescue of the lost sheep is like one sinner repenting which triggers joy in heaven. The discovery of the lost coin is like a sinner repenting which triggers joy before the angels of God. Why is there joy in heaven over sinners repenting? Because the Father has called for a celebration. He calls for a celebration because in his economy, sinners who come home is worth a costly celebration. When people repent, it's more than the Father who celebrates. Those who love God, love what God loves and they echo it. What does it cost God to celebrate our repentance? It cost him his Son who died to secure our salvation. What does it cost us as a church to celebrate someone's repentance? Nothing, other than our self-righteousness, which is worth nothing anyway. But it is so hard to give up, especially if we don't share the heart of the Father.