

IT'S A TEACHING ABOUT LOVE!

(06/18/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15:1-24

“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.” (Luke 15:20)

A few weeks ago, in either our Sunday morning Bible study or our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group, something in the discussion reminded me of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When I mentioned and then summarized this teaching of Jesus, I noted that two or three of the group members wiped away tears. The story, the parable, the teaching obviously touched several of them in a very deep way.

When I was in theological school, one of my psychology professors made an interesting distinction. The distinction is between our professed theology, our belief or beliefs, and our operational theology. The professor said that most of us, if asked, would say we believe in a kind and loving God, the kind of God that is depicted in the twenty-third psalm, a shepherd who loves each of us and who reaches out to those who have wandered from the path.

However, my professor said, when we look at our life, we may find that our operational theology, the theology out of which we are living our life is quite different. This operational theology is usually unconscious. We may have memorized a set of bible verses about a kind and loving God, and we may even believe that we believe this. However, the way we live our life discloses that our professed theology, our conscious understanding of God and our relationship with God, is not congruent with our underlying assumptions about life, God, and ourselves.

How is this operational theology created? Jungian psychologists believe that we project the God archetype, the archetype of divinity that is at the center, the core of our psyche, onto our parents; they become the first human carriers of the God archetype. The way they carry or incarnate this archetype shapes our understanding of God and our relationship with God, thus creating our operational theology. The good news is that a distorted or twisted or unhealthy operational theology can be changed or healed later in life through what my professor called “Theo-therapy,” the therapy or healing of our understanding of God and then our relationship with God.

For example, if our parent was a demanding perfectionist, this is the kind of world in which we lived as a child. It is, then, no great stretch for us to believe that this is the way life is, and that God wants and expects us to be perfect. We may say we believe that God is a loving, forgiving God, but when we look at our life, it is clear that our operational theology gives evidence of an unconscious God who is demanding, angry, judgmental, and punishing.

In this example, no matter what we say we believe about a loving God, when we look honestly at our life, we will discover that our religion is basically fear-based. Since we believe God that focuses more on our failures than our successes, we focus more on our failures than our successes. In relation to our daily list of things that need to be done, at the end of the day we focus more on the things we didn't get done than the things we accomplished. We feel that we are always falling short. To make sure we don't evoke God's judgment, we feel we need to be the perfect human beings that we believe God wants us to be. We become perfectionists, perhaps not in relation to other people and the world, but certainly in relation to ourselves.

Though, sad to say, I find that perfectionists are usually not simply hard on themselves; they bring "God's judgment" to bear on other people, the world, and life as well. Nothing is the way it "should" be.

Our spiritual journey, which is fed by worship, prayer, our reading, and participation in study and growth groups, invites us to examine and work through our childhood beliefs to see what makes sense to us as adults, and to see what makes sense to us in light of the teachings of Jesus. Once our understanding of God begins to grow, our experience of life begins to grow, and our relationship with God begins to deepen in ways that are both religiously and psychologically healthy.

I suspect this is what happened in the study group a few weeks ago. In relation to something we were discussing, I told them the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And it touched several participants.

Sometimes our operational theology is shaped by a collective or institutionalized professed theology. For example, there is a strain of Christian theology that holds the forgiveness of sin to be the primary dynamic in our relationship with God. It begins with the assumption that God wants us to be perfect, for only if we are perfect can we enter into God's presence. However, we are human, all too human. As the apostle Paul reminds us, "we all sin and fall short of the glory of God."

Since we cannot make ourselves perfect by our own efforts, since we are essentially sinners, this school of theology offers a supernatural solution. It assures us that God has taken all our sin and placed it on Jesus. Then, like the Old Testament scapegoat or the sacrificial lamb, God killed him in our place. If we just believe this, we are free from the oppressive weight of our sins.

The problem is that this way of thinking, this professed theology is very strange. It defies belief (though some say it is at the heart of their belief). What God did to Jesus is not something that a parent, especially a loving parent, would do to his/her children. And if we, who are very human parents, would not do this to our children, why do we believe that God would do this to Jesus?

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, also called the Parable of the Lost Son, presents us with another way of thinking about God and God's relationship with us. The parable appears only in the Gospel of Luke, indicating that it was part of an oral or written tradition in Luke's church that was not available to Matthew or Mark or even Q when they wrote their gospels. If it had been available to Matthew, Mark, or Q, I am sure they would have included it, for it contains the central element of Jesus' teaching concerning the nature of God. In this parable, Jesus tells us that God is like a good, a loving parent.

The parable begins, like many fairy tales, with a father and his two sons. From the testimony of scripture, it appears that God often acts in what we would call a counter-cultural way, e.g., preferring the younger to the elder sibling. We find this counter-cultural dynamic in the story of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and Joseph in relation to his ten older brothers. In Jesus' parable, the younger son, despite his follies, grows and matures spiritually through his journey more than the elder son who, in his desire to be the perfect son, the obedient son, never leaves home. In Jungian terms, the elder son does not individuate.

The younger son is not a bad or evil or sinful person. He is simply not content to stay at home, live up to his father's expectations, take over the family business, and fulfill his father's dreams. He wants to live his own life. He embarks upon a journey into an unknown world. The younger son exemplifies the archetype of the hero, the one who travels to far-off lands, engages in adventures, struggles, is wounded by life, and then returns to his people humbled by his experience and much wiser than when he departed.

Luke tells us that the younger son begins his individuation journey by acting out his shadow; he squanders his inheritance in dissolute living. (I love that phrase, "dissolute living." Nobody says that anymore!) He enjoys his experience of freedom, but he has not internalized the responsibility that attends adult life. He is not interested in working and earning a living. He is only too willing to live off an inheritance that was built by his father's labor. Before long the inheritance that served to insulate him from a central lesson about life has dwindled away.

The son's only crime, his only "sin" is that he acts out his shadow; he does not integrate in a healthy way within a system of values. He basically thinks and acts like a child. He does not

know the importance of work. He does not know the pride that comes from earning his own way. He is not trying to make his own creative contribution to life.

Sigmund Freud said that the two most important values in life are work and love. If we engage in meaningful, productive work, no matter how humble it may be, we are making a creative contribution to life. If we have someone we love and someone who loves us, we echo the heartbeat of the universe. Actually, Freud didn't say this last part about love echoing the heartbeat of the universe; I did.

If we have both of these, according to Freud, we are living a meaningful life. If we have only one, the foundation of our life and our identity become shaky. If we have neither, our life will be empty and neurotic. We will fail to experience the happiness that comes from living our life fully. Our soul, our deepest core, will not be shaped by the joys and struggles of both our work and our love. It will remain shallow and immature. Actually, Freud didn't say this last part about how work and love shape our soul; I did.

Alfred Adler, one of Freud's early followers who went on to become the founder of the school of Individual Psychology, added a third dimension to Freud's formulation. Adler tells us that what is important is love, work, and making a contribution to life, leaving the world a better place than how we found it.

Carl Gustav Jung, another of Freud's early colleagues who separated from him to establish the school of Analytic Psychology, added a fourth dimension. Jung tells us that what is important is love, work, making a contribution to life, and our individuation, our inner journey, our spiritual journey. Now you know why I like Jung so much!

Alcoholics Anonymous, which was founded June 10, 1935, in Akron, Ohio by Robert Holbrook Smith and William Griffith Wilson, tells us that sometimes we have to hit bottom before we decide to change. The younger son finally hits bottom. It is at the nadir, the lowest point of his life that he finally comes to his senses. The younger son is ashamed. He is living below the level where he should be living. From this realization arises an experience of genuine remorse, of genuine humility. From his harsh encounter with reality, the reality of life and his immature behavior, he undergoes a *metanoia*, a radical transformation.

The son returns to his father head bowed, hat in hand. On the journey home he rehearses his reentry speech. He goes to his father as a penitent, knowing that he has no right to expect his father's forgiveness. The parable is usually presented as a call for us, like the younger son, to repent, to confess our sins, and to return to God, for if we do so, God will forgive us and restore us to a place of honor in his kingdom.

However, this isn't what happens in the parable! The father sees his son while the son is still far off. You see, the father was waiting for his son. Every evening he stood on the porch with the boy's mother looking off into the distance. When the father became discouraged and voiced his doubt that their beloved son would return, the mother would restore his faith. "He will return. I know he will return. And when he does, we will be here waiting for him."

When the son's emaciated form appears on the distant horizon, the father knows him immediately. No distance of space or time can deceive the eyes of love! The father doesn't wait for the son to come to him; he immediately goes to the son. In fact, he runs to him! Filled with compassion, he puts his arms around his son and kisses him. The Greek word that is translated as "kissed" means to kiss tenderly. He kisses him tenderly because the boy is standing in rags, filled with shame.

The son begins the confession he has rehearsed on his long journey, how his selfishness and superficial values led him to squander the gifts that had been given to him by his father. The son begins to tell his father that though he is asking for forgiveness, he has no right to expect forgiveness. He hopes that his father might accept him as a hired servant, giving him the opportunity to prove that he has learned his lesson. The son is willing to crawl.

However, the father doesn't care about the confession! He doesn't even listen to it, *nor does he offer forgiveness!* What he offers to the son is a love that is so strong and constant that it could never be damaged by the son's ill-advised and immature decisions!

The father would not spare his son the experience of making his own decisions and reaping the consequences of his actions, for this is how a child grows into an adult. In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the shepherd searches for the lost lamb. In the Parable of the Lost Son, however, the father does not search for the lost son. He simply stands and waits. The son must come to his senses and choose to return. Paradoxically, both stories are accurate depictions of God's relationship with us when we become lost.

When the son returns, the father does not hesitate. There is not a moment to be lost. The "best robe" which is used to cover the boy's rags was kept for only the most distinguished guest. Giving it bestowed the highest honor. The ring that is placed on the son's finger means that the son is still a son, still an heir. The sandals that the father has placed on his son's feet are a symbol of kinship, for only slaves went barefoot. In the words of the old Negro spiritual,

*All God's children got shoes,
When I get to Heaven, I'm goin' to put on my shoes,
And walk all over God's heaven.*

This spiritual articulates the hope that in heaven Black people will no longer be slaves. We, of course, would like to see that happen here on earth as well.

The Parable of the Lost Son is usually regarded as a teaching about repentance and forgiveness. To be sure, the son is repentant. The realization of his immaturity is an important part of his growth. But there is no evidence that the matter of forgiveness even crosses the father's mind. *He kisses away his son's confession!* The story is not about sin and salvation, about repentance and forgiveness; *the story is about love!* The parable should really be called the Parable of the Loving Father.

Jesus tells us that God is a far better parent than our earthly, human parents could ever be. As human parents, if our children were to make a mess of their lives, we would be sad. As we know, we are not able to prevent them from making ill-advised choices, nor would we do so even if we could, for our children have to live their own lives and hopefully grow through their struggles. Our hope is that, like the younger son, our children will one day come to their senses and begin to live their lives in all their fullness.

If at some point our children were to return to us bowed and beaten down by the struggles of life, hardships which they may very well have brought upon themselves, would we offer them our forgiveness? I dare say this would never cross our minds! What we would offer them is our acceptance, our support, and our love!

If our relationship with our children is not centered in the dynamic of offense and forgiveness, what makes us think that our relationship with God would be built around this dynamic? If God is the loving parent in the parable, as Jesus suggests, God wouldn't focus on our sin as the central dynamic in our relationship. God would focus on the relationship itself, hoping that we can experience the constancy of a love that pulls us back to the center as often as we go astray.

God loves us just as much the father in the parable loves his sons. God loves us with a love that is constant and unswerving. This love cannot be diminished by anything we do or don't do in life. Even if we make a mess of our lives, the love is there!

I don't know what the two or three people in the study group were thinking when they teared up during my summary of this parable. I could, however, make a guess. Despite what some parts of the Bible say, I don't believe that God gets angry with us when we make mistakes or do something stupid with our life. God is waiting on the porch for us, just as the father and

the mother waited every evening for their son. God does not offer us forgiveness, but a joyous, embracing love!

As Jesus tells us, all we have to do is turn around, open our arms, and receive it.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.