

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Younger Son*

SERIES: *Tell Me A Story...*

SCRIPTURES: *Luke 15*

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

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**Credit to Henri Nouwen*

Well good morning, it so great to worship with you. Want to say welcome to all of you here in this room and to those of you gathered on-line and tuning in to the live stream.

We're in the second week of our series called **"Tell Me A Story"** (Series Graphic). Last week we talked about the significance of story-telling as it relates to our Christian faith. Remember NT Wright's statement from last week...

"Stories have a unique power to change people – all the more when we are talking about the story of God as 'the immanent lover of the human race'.

And we said that one of the advantages of story-telling is **the invitation for listeners to enter into the story.** Through story-telling we gain not only head-knowledge but heart-knowledge.

This week and for the next two weeks we want to hear, learn from and enter into one the greatest stories ever told about God as the immanent lover of the human race. It's a story that Jesus told in **Luke 15**. So if you have a Bible you can go ahead and turn there with me.

The story is called, "The Lost Son."

In addition, if you're interested in doing some more reading about this parable, I would encourage you to consider picking up a copy of Henri Nouwen's book "The Return of the Prodigal" (**Image of book cover**). One of the most powerful books I've read exploring this story.

Many years ago, Henri Nouwen came across a painting by the artist, Rembrandt, depicting Jesus' parable, which inspired the writing of his book. The **PICTURE** on the screen is an image of that painting. The painting seems to capture the significance of each character in the story.

The hunched over figure in the very front is the **younger son** returning home. The man standing over him, with his hands on his shoulders represents **the Father**. And if you look closely off to the side, hidden in the shadows you can see another figure, standing with his hands crossed in front, peering down at the "reunion of Father and lost son". That figure represents **the older son**.

Each week, we'll be taking a detailed look at each of the characters. Telling their story and then finding ourselves in their stories.

We begin this morning with...

I. The story of the younger son.

Luke 15 - ¹¹ Jesus told this story: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

The story begins with the younger son...

A. Leaving home for a distant land.

Figuratively speaking, we all have a home. Home is the life we were made for...created for. As Christians, we would say, home is “living the way Jesus created us to live.”

In this story the younger son has a home. But he doesn't like home and so he decides he's leaving.

Luke describes the leaving so simply and matter-of-factly that perhaps we don't grasp the full enormity of the younger son's decision to leave...that this was an almost unheard of event...hurtful, offensive and in radical contradiction to the tradition of the time.

Ken Bailey, a New Testament scholar who has spent over 40 years living in the Middle East writes this about the younger son's departure.

For over 15 years I have been asking people...about the implications of the son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The conversation runs as follows: “Has anyone ever made such a request in your Village?” “Never!” “Could anyone ever make such a request?” “Impossible!” “If anyone ever did, what would happen?” “His father would beat him, of course!” “Why?” “The request means – he wants his father to die.” (pg. 35-36).

The son's leaving is a heartless rejection of his home and an act of blatant rebellion against his family.

By the way...we'll be talking about the Father in a couple of weeks. But, one of the things that's always amazed me in this story is how the Father responds. He obliges

his son's request. He isn't condemning or violent. But rather, he allows his son the freedom to choose his own life.

It's important that we have an accurate understanding of what God is like. God never forces himself into our lives. Life with God is always a choice and God often graciously acquiesces to our choices. So much of life is the result of the choices we make.

The younger son has made his choice, he doesn't need his father telling him how to live his life...so he set off for a distant country.

"A distant country" is another way of saying...he set off in search of something that would satisfy him outside of his father's home, something that would bring him security and happiness. It's another way of saying...he's lost.

And so as we enter the story of the younger son, we are invited to think about what lostness means in our own world today. Are we lost? Have we left the father's house for a distant country and if so, how?

Henri Nouwen says that, **Leaving home is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe.**

And that "lostness" or "the distant country" is **the world in which everything considered holy at home is disregarded.**

Lostness is based on this faulty idea that many of us live with, that we are the boss or the King of our own lives. In our personal lives and in our culture, we have all built our own little kingdoms, where we get to make up our own rules about how we live and no one else tells us what to do.

The implication here is that at the heart of lostness is the idea, **“I will do what I want to do, when I want to do it.”**

And in that broader sense, I wonder if there are a lot of us in here who can relate. We don't like someone else, telling us, how to live our lives.

I was trying to think of an example we could all relate to and I couldn't come up with anything, so I'm sure this is something only I struggle with. But have you ever had this happen? You're driving along at a reasonable speed. All of a sudden, you realize someone is right up on your bumper.

Now what do you start thinking when this happens? *“I was on this road, first. Don't rush me. I'm driving plenty fast enough. If you were in such a hurry you should have left sooner.”*

And what do you do in scenarios like this? Are you inclined to speed up and drive faster? No. What do most of us do? We actually tend to slow down. Why? Because what's happening is they are trying to control your behavior. And we don't like it when someone else is trying to control our behavior.

And we all do this in different ways, at different places in our lives, don't we? Notice in the parable we are told the younger son...

“squandered his wealth in wild living.”

That little phrase “wild living” can mean a lot of things. But near the top of the list, many scholars, believe it has to do with money and sex. And I think it's because money and sex tend to be two of the primary places where we like to build our own kingdom.

“I will do what I want to do, when I want to do it, with my money and my sex”.

How many times have you thought...*"If I just had enough money, if I could just buy whatever I wanted...then I'd be happy."*

I heard a story about a wealthy man who went to his pastor over a concern about tithing. He said: *"I have a problem. I have been tithing for some time. It wasn't too bad when I was making \$20,000 a year. I could afford to give the \$2,000. But you see, now I am making \$500,000, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000 a year."*

Pastor thought about wealthy man's dilemma, then said: *"Yes, sir. I see that you do have a problem. I think we ought to pray about it. Is that alright?"*

The wealthy man agreed, the pastor bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority. *"Dear Lord, this man has a problem, and I pray that you will help him. Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe."*

That's what money can do to us. And this is in blatant rebellion to Jesus teaching.

"You cannot serve two masters...you cannot serve both God and money."

Many of us are drowning in overconsumption, gluttony and comfort because money has become our own little kingdom.

And sex, is right up there in our society as well, isn't it? I was reading some statistics about this...did you know that...

1 in 8 searches on-line is related to "sexually explicit" material.

70% of men visit pornographic sites on a monthly basis (it's probably closer to 90% of men that look at pornography)

1 in 3 people who look at pornography are women.

50% of guys say they have seen nude pics by the time they are 13 years old.

All of these statistics are in blatant rebellion to Jesus own words. **“Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”**

And just to be clear again, not saying money and sex are evil. The church so often sends the wrong message here. Money and sex God’s ideas. Just that when we don’t do them within the confines of “God’s home”, they often leave us empty, lost, unsatisfied.

So the younger son went looking for freedom in a distant country, life his own way. And it doesn’t go well.

¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

Now this is kind of interesting, isn’t it...pigs? Have you thought about the presence of the pigs in this story? Remember, Jesus is Jewish. He’s speaking mostly to Jewish listeners. What is on the forbidden eating list for Jews? Pigs. That’s right. The younger son hasn’t just hit rock bottom...he’s hit the lowest of the low. He’s feeding and eat with animals that are unclean in his homeland.

You see, one of the things you’ll eventually discover is that home is where you belong and really the only place you can survive and when we try to live outside of that life, we can’t survive.

(PICTURE) Go back for a moment and look at Rembrandts painting. What do you notice about Rembrandts depiction of the younger son? Notice his shaved head, that's a sign of humiliation in his day. He is depicted wearing yellowish-brown, torn underclothing. One shoe has fallen off, the other is torn and coming off. He's poor, wretched, humiliated...he's homeless!

The truth is, there is no such thing as a home away from home.

Many of us, at some point in life found ourselves saying, "I don't want anyone controlling my behavior." And we went searching for a distant country.

And do you know what you found, and if you haven't, you will...you found that you are now ruled by something else. **That thing that initially began as an expression of your freedom is now king of your life.** It rules you.

Some of you thought, I can drink what I want, when I want, with whom I want. And then you woke up one morning and you realized now you can't stop. That drinking now rules your life.

Some of you thought, I can watch what I want, when I want, with whom I want. And now you're addicted and now you're watching things you know you shouldn't watch and it's affecting your behavior and you can't stop.

Some of you thought, I can buy what I want, when I want, with whom I want. And now you're in financial trouble.

It all started with your misguided sense of home. You thought you could be king of your own life, that you could live in a distant country far from home...but you were not created to live that way, you were created to live in the home of the good father and **when you say no to Him, you will simply replace him with something else that eventually rules your life.** And pretty soon life doesn't make sense. You'll be eating pods with the pigs.

The distant country living often looks good or sounds good, but leaves us dissatisfied and empty. It's often a place of pain, sadness, regret. A place with lots of doubt and insecurity about life.

It turns out we probably all have a little bit of the younger son in each of us. Not sure where you're at on this journey. Perhaps, right now in life, you feel like you're in the distant country or maybe you know someone personally who is in the distant country. And maybe you're beginning to wonder if there's a way home or if home even exists.

If that's you, then I'm so glad you came this morning because thankfully the younger son's story does not end in the distant country...

II. The younger son returns home.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

Maybe the first thing you need to be reminded about this morning is that

A. There is a real place called home.

The first step in returning home was remembering he had one...you have one.

Home is a place where you're supposed to belong. Home is a place where you're supposed to be safe. Home is a place where love is supposed to prevail. But so often we live in a world that isn't safe and where everybody feels excluded and where love doesn't prevail. Because it turns out that our longing for home, our homesickness is

something that this world cannot satisfy. That's what the younger son had to come to terms with.

You and I and everybody was made for a deeper home. Jesus came to talk about this home where we belong.

18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you... "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

Even if you're not sure where it is. Even if you're not sure how to find it. What it looks like? How to get started back home? According to the story of the lost son, Jesus says...there is a home for you.

So hang in there, start searching, start asking questions.

But...how do we find it? How do we begin making our way back home? Once again I'll invite us to enter into the story of the younger son and at least highlight a few of the things that made a difference for him on his journey home.

First, the journey home always involves humility.

B. Humility

"I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."

"I need help. I can't do this on my own. I can't do life on my own." That's humility.

Nouen says it like this, **"Receiving forgiveness requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all of the healing, restoring and renewing."**

It turns out humility is central in returning home to God. We all have to reach a place in our lives where we admit that there is God and it is not us. It's hard to admit that we are not self-sufficient or in control of our lives.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we took Keagan to have his adenoids removed. They were oversized made it hard for him to breathe through his nose. Also causes snoring and bad breath. He was pretty nervous about the whole thing. And as they were getting him ready to go, Jenny and I were able to sit in the prep room with him. I felt good and confident as we sat waiting together. I could talk to him. Encourage him. Hold him. But there came a point where, they told us we had to leave. And we had to hand him over to the nurses and the doctor. They took him back to surgery and we couldn't go with. And all of a sudden I realized I couldn't control the next steps in the process. It was out of my hands. I needed help. He needed help. But there was nothing I could do.

So I did the only thing I could think of...I told them there had been a major mistake, big misunderstanding. There was someone there who snores really loud and suffers from bad breath. But it's not Keagan, it's Jenny. She's the one who needs surgery. I'm just kidding.

I did the only thing I could think of in that moment...I prayed.

Because one of the best ways to practice humility is to get down on your hands and knees and pray. And say, "Ok, God this situation is too big for me. This life is too big for me. These relationships too big for me. This addiction is too big for me. This world is too big for me. And I could use some of your help."

That's how we have to hand our lives over to God. And so this week just as a practice of learning the pathway of humility which leads back home...I'd just invite you to get down on your knees once every day and just ask God to help you, through life,

through your circumstances, in your relationships, with your attitude. Give your life to him.

Second, we must also remember that

C. God is good.

I think this is just so important in our world today. There are too many people who have mistaken views of God and they're not sure they want to be anywhere close to God. I think it was last year I showed this cartoon depiction of how many people think about God.

God is often seen as the judgemental smiter with his finger on the smite button. And if that's your picture of God, you may not want to return home.

But did you pick up on this, in the story? In the pit of despair and brokenness, the younger son remembers what? His father's goodness.

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

Whatever it is you think about God and his character and whatever mess you have made of your own life. Whatever mistakes and failures are haunting you...remember at the very center is the Father's unconditional love to have you back in his home.

There are a number of ways you can do this. Here's one suggestions for this week:

Read John 14 – This is that passage I just quoted from a few minutes ago. But it's just a great passage of Scripture of Jesus' promises to his own disciples about his love for them. Read it and soak it in this week.

Remembering the goodness of the Father, invites us to return home where we belong.

And then third...you must remember that...

D. You are still His child.

Nouen says it like this, **“The younger son’s return takes place in the very moment that he reclaims his sonship...”**

Did you pick on this? It’s fascinating, even though he is prepared to return and be recognized as a servant...throughout he continues to refer to his father as...his father.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

The younger son, as lost as he was, still hung on to this slim sliver of hope...that he was yet a son of the good father. And that was enough to get him up and moving.

Sometimes in our lostness and rebellion, sin and failure we lose our sense of value and self-worth...that’s a debilitating place to be. When that happens we don’t want to get up and get on with life. That’s why remembering you are still a child of God’s even when you are lost is so important. Our identity as human beings, is rooted not in our sinfulness or our failure but in our daughtership or sonship of our Great Father.

I think I’ve shared with you before, one of my favorite Scriptures is from the prophet Isaiah...where God says, **“I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”**

Isn't that an awesome picture? You are engraved in the palms of God's hands.

You know how we say in our culture about Dad's and their daughters. She has him in the palm of her hand. It means, Daddy loves her so much, he would do anything for her. God says in Isaiah... *"Your Daddy loves you so much. He would do anything for you."*

And at the center of the Bible, God does what? He hangs on a cross, and nails pierced the palms of his hands...you are being engraved out of his great love for you.

A Christian writer George MacDonald, lived about 100 years ago. And McDonald often wrote about princesses. Somebody once asked him, "Why do you do that so much?" McDonald's response, **"It's because every little girl is a princess."**

And he wasn't being metaphorical when he said that. He said, **"If you think about it, a princess is the daughter of a king. A prince is just the son of a king. That's every human being who is made and loved by God."**

Perhaps returning home for you this week means remembering this part of the story.

Go about your day with confidence (not arrogance), but confidence because you too are a son or daughter of the Great King.