

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Father*

SERIES: *Tell Me A Story...*

SCRIPTURES: *Luke 15:11-32*

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

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**Credit to Henri Nouwen, Ken Bailey, John Ortberg, Philip Yancey.*

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, at home, tuning in to the live stream.

We're in the final week of our series called "Tell me a story..." (**Series Graphic**) Recognizing the power of story-telling in expressing truth about our journey of faith. Theologian NT Wright's says...

"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'.

We've been walking through this story that Jesus told about a lost son or prodigal son. And again, I'd encourage you to check out Henri Nouen's book "The Return of the Prodigal." Which is based on a painting, by the artist Rembrandt. The painting depicts three primary characters in the story. **IMAGE OF PAINTING.**

Two weeks ago we spent some time focusing on **the younger son**. His lostness involved rebellion against his father and family. *"I don't need anyone telling me how to live my life."* And it eventually led to ruin.

Then last week we looked at **the older son**. Interestingly enough, we said it turns out the older son was also lost. No, he never left home in blatant rebellion, but his lostness was self-righteousness. He was living in a world where a person's value is based upon performance. For many of us who are church people the lostness of the older son is the one we struggle with most.

This morning we want to take a look at one final character in the story.

You see, when it comes story-telling, every great story has a climax. The highest point of tension within the story. Today, today...we come to the climax of our story. How will the father respond to his lost sons?

In fact, the story we've been walking through is often referred to as the Prodigal Son or the lost son...but those titles are not actually in the Greek text of the Bible. And in some ways are a misnomer of this particular story. Because the truth is...the story isn't mostly about the two sons...this story is really about **the father**.

The word **prodigal** literally means "**excessive or extravagant**" and is often applied to the younger son who "squandered his wealth in extravagant living." But as we'll see this morning the extravagance of the younger son is underwhelming in comparison to the extravagance of the father.

This is a story mostly about the excessive or extravagant love of the father. Or we might call it prodigal love. God's prodigal love for his lost humanity.

And so if you would, open up your Bible to Luke 15 and let's read the

I. The Story of the Father

¹¹ Jesus continued: “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 first thing we need to notice here is that...

A. Prodigal love is not forced.

Keep in mind we are coming at this story from the perspective that the younger son’s request for his share of the estate was an act of blatant rejection towards his father. (Bailey/Nouen)

And a couple of weeks ago I briefly mentioned this idea, that one of the surprising things in the story, is the father’s response. That the father would not do more to force his son stay.

Forced behavior often seems to be the mode of operation in our world. “If you don’t do what I want you to do, I’ll force you to do it.” Some of the darkest times within the history of the Christian church has had to do with forced behavior. (Forced baptism)

And there’s a big difference between forced behavior and chosen behavior.

Forced behavior is not genuine or authentic.

One of the things the response of the father teaches is that God is not interested in forced behavior. God is interested in genuinely changed hearts. People making choices to know and to love and to follow him.

We all understand this, especially those who are parents. There are a lot of parents who want to control their children's behavior. But think about it...would you want the kind of kids you have tell their whole lives, "Wear these clothes. Take these classes. Go to that school. Apply for this job. Marry that person. Purchase this house." And you always have to tell them exactly what to do as long as they live? Would you want that? (No, is the correct answer here. No, you wouldn't want that.) That's forced behavior.

Why would you not want that? Because your main goal is not for them to be little robots who carry out your instructions. Your goal is that they become people of great character and judgement on their own. You want them to learn to make good choices on their own. And the only way for them to do that, is to make lots and lots of decisions. Which of course means, you will have to allow them to make a lot of wrong decisions. But that will become one of the primary ways they learn and grow and mature.

John Ortberg, "Very often God's will for you will be, "I want you to decide," because decision-making is an indispensable part of character formation. God is primarily interested in the character forming business not forced-behavior-modification.

And in that sense, I think the invitation lays before all of us. Jesus offers us his way of doing life...that's what home is. And just as with the younger son we all have to make a choice. With our lives in general but also in each moment of each day...will I choose the Father's way or my own way?

Now, while it's true that God does not force himself on us, let us not mistake this for "a lack of concern." So let's talk for a moment about...

B. Prodigal love "runs".

Really kind of neat. Watch what happens in this story. The young man hits rock bottom and determines that he's going home...

20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

So many good things happening in this part of the story...

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him...

Where you fix your eyes says a lot about what's really important to you. Children learn this from a very young age, don't they? When kids are little they often use the phrase... "Mommy watch this. Daddy watch this." What are they really saying...when you look at me I know you care.

I was thinking about how important this in our culture today. In our culture we spend a lot of us spend a lot of time with our eyes fixed on a screen. Computer, Television, cellular etc...

But there's a big difference between a dad whose eyes are on a screen and a dad whose are fully engaged on his children or his wife....

Imagine if this story read something like:

While his son was a still a long way off...his father didn't see him because his eyes were fixed intently on a screen...

In fact, one of the phrases that you find, repeated throughout the Gospels in relation to Jesus is...

And Jesus saw...

In John 5 – Jesus saw a lame man...

In Matthew 9 – Jesus saw a tax collector...

In John 6 - Jesus saw hungry crowds...

In John 9 - Jesus saw a blind man...

In John 19 – Jesus saw a distressed mother...

And notice the common denominator in what Jesus was seeing? People. Jesus had trained his eyes to see people.

The point in this story is that this is not a distant father who is aloof or disinterested in the outcome of his son's life. This is not a father who has given up or abandoned his son. Rather this is a father whose son was always on his mind. He was ever hopeful, watchful that his son would return.

This week may I encourage you to think about where your eyes are spending their time. Who could you love this week by fixing your focused attention on them?

But wait there's more...notice...**he ran to his son...**

In fact Bailey writes...

“An oriental nobleman with flowing robes never runs...to do so is humiliating.”
Weatherhead writes “It is so very undignified in Eastern eyes for an elderly man to run.”

So why does he run?

It's important to remember that the ancient middle east was a much more communal culture. What the younger son has done is not just towards his father but regards the village and the entire extended family as well.

While not specifically referenced within this story, some scholars talk about an ancient Palestinian tradition called **Kezazah**. A practice whereby a person who sold or lost everything to gentiles was "ostracized from the community." Sometimes this was done in a formal ceremony whereby a clay pot was smashed in the presence of the rebellious individual symbolizing their broken fellowship. The term literally means **the cutting off**.

Whether formal Kezazah awaits the young son or not Bailey says...

His entry back to the village will be humiliating and ruthless as the pent-up hostilities of the village are vented on him...He will be subject to taunt songs and many other types of verbal and perhaps even physical abuse. (Bailey)

So why does the father run? Perhaps it's because he knows the humiliation and rejection that awaits his son. He watches from a distance, he runs, however ignoble...because he wants to be the first to reach his boy.

The actions of the father speak to our understanding once again of God's true nature. In running, the father makes himself vulnerable. That's what prodigal love does. This theme is seen in so many times throughout the Biblical narrative.

In the Old Testament for example God dwells in a tabernacle among his people. And a tabernacle was not some sort of prestigious dwelling place. It was kind of an ordinary common tent among the people.

And then according to the Gospel writer John, this God literally takes on flesh. He is born into an animal feed trough. He comes as a servant. Paul says it like this in 2 Corinthians 5:21...

21 God made him who had no sin to be sin^[b] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The vulnerable love of this father and his willingness to take on humiliation and rejection is the same kind of love emulated by Jesus.

Where in complete vulnerability he allowed himself to be nailed to the cross. He allowed himself to breathe one final breath. He allowed himself to succumb to the horror of death itself.

Now why would he do that? So that we don't have. He loves you that much. So that we don't have to suffer the humiliation and rejection we deserve. The cross is the ultimate picture of God's prodigal love.

And that kind of leads to the final aspect of this excessive love. It just so important to understand that...

C. Prodigal love comes with “no strings attached.”

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

Notice the acceptance exemplified by the father in this story doesn't have qualifiers or stipulations. He doesn't ask questions or ask for any kind of retribution. He doesn't harbor suspicion about his son's intentions.

“How do I know you are truly sorry for what you've done?” Or “If you're willing to put in some time as a servant and pay back a portion of the inheritance you've squandered...”

But there is none of that. The younger son starts out the speech he has rehearsed about sinning against his father.

But he is basically cut off as his father says...bring his robe...A ring is placed on his finger, he is given new sandals to wear. It is a symbol of his acceptance into the household once again without stipulations. This is the father's way of saying, there is no payback necessary. No strings attached to your welcome home.

Go back to **Rembrandt's image** for just a moment. Again, the attire of the characters within the painting is so significant, isn't it? The Father and older brother wear these robes of stature. The younger son in his lostness has lost his but it is returned to him immediately...not strings attached!

Folks this is not often the kind of love that we are accustomed to seeing and experiencing, is it? We like to put stipulations on our acceptance and love of others. I want to know the person is truly sorry for what they've done. I want them to suffer some kind of payment. But prodigal love has no strings attached.

A couple of years ago I came across a modern day retelling of this story by Philip Yancey in his book called, **What's So Amazing About Grace?**...that really captures the heart of this concept.

Yancey says picture a young girl who grows up in a loving home. But when she's young, she's kind of rebellious. Her parents do not much care for the music she listens to or the clothes she wears or her nose ring. She does not much care for their values or their church. They have another argument. She locks herself in her room. When her dad knocks on the door, she screams, "I hate you! Leave me alone." She decides to run away.

She heads for the bright lights of the Big City. When she gets there she soon meets a man who drives the nicest car she has ever seen. He gives her a ride. He shows her the city. She realizes how much life and fun her parents have been robbing her of. This good life goes on for a month, two months, a year. The parties and the gifts and the glamour are like being in another world for her.

Then after a year, the first signs of illness, brokenness, begin to appear. Before she knows it, she's out on the street. No money; no clothes; no car; no parties. She is alone. She uses what she knows on the streets to get whatever money she can, but she looks gaunt and thin. She eats whatever she can find. She sleeps on a metal grate or a park bench.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything around her looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She is a little girl again, lost in a cold and frightening city. Her pockets are empty. Her clothes are rags. Her stomach is hungry. She needs a fix. Her eyes are filled with tears.

Then her mind flashes on a single image...her home many miles away. And she thinks to herself, "Oh God, why did I leave?." She is sobbing, and now more than ever she just wants to go home.

So she tries calling her parents. Three straight calls. Three straight connections with the answering machine. Twice she hangs up without leaving a message. The third time she says, "*Dad, mom, it's me. I was wondering about coming home. I'm going to be*

on a bus. It will pass through sometime around midnight on Tuesday. If you're not there, I'll understand and I'll just keep on going. Just wanted you to know."

The whole time on the bus, she can't turn off the questions. She wonders if they even got the message. She wishes she'd given them more warning. She wonders if they've given her up for dead. She keeps thinking about what she is going to say to her father. She keeps rehearsing this little speech in her mind. "Dad, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know it was my fault, not yours. Can you forgive me?"

Finally, the bus pulls into the station, and the driver says, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all the time we have." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She looks in her little compact mirror, tries to brush her hair and get the lipstick marks off her teeth. She sees the needle marks in her arms and wonders if her parents will notice...if they're even there.

She walks into that bus terminal at one o'clock in the morning. She has imagined a thousand different scenes in her mind, but not one of them prepares her for what she sees because there inside those concrete walls around those plastic chairs, in that bus terminal, stands a group of 40 brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents and one dog.

They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing kazoos and cheering for her as if she were a hero coming home from a war. There is a giant hand-painted sign saying, "Welcome home" taped all the way across the back wall. Standing in front of that crowd with a tear-stained face and a trembling smile is the father whom she told she hated the last time she saw him. She can't bring herself to look him in the face as she starts her little speech. "Dad, I'm so sorry..."

He puts his hands on her face, and he raises her eyes up to him as he wipes away her tears. He begins to laugh and cry so hard his whole body shakes. "I know," he says. What he used to say to her when she would cry when she was a tiny little baby,

"I know, I know, I know. No need for another word. You'll miss the party. We have to have a party." He takes that beat up frail little body in his arms and holds her so tight. Because for this father there are no strings attached. His love is overwhelming and excessive and transforming.

And folks this is the climax of the story. This is what the story was building to...there's Jesus, surrounded by a whole host lost and broken sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes and self-righteous church people trying to prove their worth and just hoping they'll be good enough, clean enough, holy enough and Jesus says, *"Now if you start with a father like the one in this story, and then you think of One a hundred times better, a thousand times wiser, a million times more loving, then you'll start to get some tiny little echo of what a good God is and how much He loves you."* And how that Father spends every moment of every day looking, searching, seeking, calling for his children to *"Come on home."*

That's the kind of father that can change your life and transform your heart. That's the kind of father worth celebrating and giving your life to.

And folks, one final thought. So often, when we read this story we think of ourselves as one of the sons and God as the Father and that good and right and true. It's the place start. But not where we stop the story...Nouen writes

"Whether you are the younger son or the older son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father. The time has come to claim your true vocation – to be a father who can welcome his children home without asking them any questions and without wanting anything from them in return."

We are not just to look at the Father in the story and be grateful that we have a father like that...but I think that the trajectory of Scripture and that the purpose of the Jesus community is to be the community that emulates the character of prodigal love to a lost world.

We must be the community that sees the lost, the hurting, the broken from a distance. We must have our eyes open. Eyes filled with compassion even in the face of blatant rebellion.

We must be the community that runs towards. That we would be vulnerable and authentic in our interactions with one another. Willing to lay down our rights on behalf of others.

We must be the community that learns to practice love with “no strings attached.” Because this is how our father has loved us.

Transition into communion:

This morning as we close our time together and reflect on the nature of the Father. I want to take us back to the title of our series... “Tell me a story...”

Part of the power of stories, is the invitation to enter into the experience. We want to close our time today with one of the central experiences that we are invited into as followers of Jesus as we seek to experience God as the immanent lover of the human race. And that experience is communion.

Communion is our reminder that central story in Scripture took place on Mount Calvary. Where without asking questions of us and without requiring any form of retribution God freely laid down his life and received the humiliation and rejection that we rightly deserved. He took our place in extravagant prodigal love. When we eat the bread and drink the juice we are reminded of this great love story.

Communion is one the practices that helps us to move head knowledge and theology into our hearts.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11.

²³ The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

If you would please stand and we’re going to read this prayer together as a community. When we are done reading you can begin entering the two side center aisle’s walk down front...take bread and eat, juice and drink then make your way back to your seat. If you are not able to come forward but want to take communion, please raise your hand.

8am Service:

Pastor: **This Bread which break is not the communion of the body of Christ?**

Congregation: **This bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ?**

Pastor: **This cup which we drink is not the communion of the blood of Christ?**

Congregation: **This cup which we drink is the communion of the blood of Christ?**

9:45 service:

"Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen"