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Sermon on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son
Sunday, February 4th, 2018

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

A couple of years ago I was teaching a Bible study class about the story of the prodigal son.

Mr Kostas, in his 70s, had been quiet and attentive throughout the evening.

When I finished speaking, Mr Kostas was the first one out of his chair.

I could tell, as he made his way to the front of the classroom, that he was upset.

“What about the bath,” he demanded.

“You didn’t say anything about the bath.”

I had no idea what he was talking about and told him that I did not understand his comment.

He became more agitated the longer he talked.

“You know where the son had been!”

“Yes,” I said, “in the pig pen.”

“And you know what he would have smelled like and what was on him.

The son was dirty and smelly.

The father would never hug him, kiss him, or put a robe on him until the son first had a bath.

Why didn’t you talk about the bath?”

I explained that a bath was not part of the story, but Mr. Kostas just could not believe that.

So together we read the story again.

The same story that together we heard today.

I cannot but wonder, how many of us have heard and understood this story, just as Mr. Kostas did?

As a story about the bath?

As a story about sin?

Most of us hold the two sons up as examples.

The younger son, the bad son, runs away and does even worse things.

The older son, the good son, is always at home and never disobeys.

The implication is obvious.

Be the obedient slave-like child to your heavenly father.

The difficulty though is that the whole good and bad dichotomy rarely transforms lives.

Be a good obedient child.

Is that really all this story says?

Is this story really even about the sons?

This story is more about the father than it is about the sons.

Christ introduces the story by saying, “There was a man.”

Had it been a story about the son, the story would have begun, “A certain young man had a father and a brother...”

From the beginning the focus is on the father.

Although we do hear about the son’s journey, it is always in relation to the father.

The father is the one who even makes it possible for the son to leave.

I wonder if the younger son is surprised when his father gives him his inheritance.

This is not like asking for an advance on allowance.
The son's request has real significance.
The son is like saying to his father,
"You are dead to me.
I don't need you.
I just want your stuff."
The son separates himself from his father.

Nevertheless, throughout all this the father is silent.
He does not ask questions.
He does not argue or get angry.
He does not ground his son or put him on restriction.
He simply divides his property between the two sons.
And the young son takes his part and leaves to a distant country.
As many of us leave to a distant country.
Sorrow, grief, and loss take some of us to the distant country.
Some of us travel there by way of addictions and self-destructive behavior.
For others the journey of guilt, self-condemnation or even self-hatred ends in the
distant country.

How ever we get there, the distant country is that place in which we are lost, dead,
and hungry.
We are lost to ourselves, empty of meaning, and starving for life, love, and hope.
We are just not ourselves, at least not our true selves.
Life stinks in the distant country.
But that's the grace of the distant country.
While we may go there, we eventually come to ourselves and discover that it is not a
place we want to stay.
We always want to go back home.

However, as we start going back home, we meet all those many voices that live
within us.

"You don't really think you could go home, do you?
After what you have done?
They don't want you there.
They won't take you back.
You are covered in pig stink.
You aren't worthy.
You never were."

The only way home, it seems, is to deny that we are our father's children.
"I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him,
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;
I am no longer worthy to be called your son;
treat me like one of your servants.'"

The father, however, knows that love is the real way home.
That's why today our heavenly father runs to meet his son.

Runs to meet us.
You and me.
He is there to see us safely home.
To give us the best robe.
The robe of sonship.
The robe of full, lavish, unrestrained restoration to the family.
Can you imagine putting your best coat on a boy who had been eating with and
feeding the pigs?
Over and over again our Heavenly Father recommits Himself to this runaway-come-
home.

That's what I tried to explained to Mr. Kostas, as we read again the story.
I explained to him that a bath is not part of the story, because we can never get
clean enough to come back home.
To come back to church.
Instead we come to church to become clean.
Our father who art in heaven receives us as we are.
He hugs us, kisses us, robes us – all without a bath.
Imagine that one person in your life that you want to come home — home from sin,
home from alienation, home from unbelief, home from hard-heartedness.
What it would be like to see brokenness in their face and to reach out and embrace
them and kiss them.
Christ is exactly this way!
We are immersed in His love!

Although Christ never gave his story a title, this story's most familiar title in English is
"The Prodigal Son."
However, the actual definition of the word "prodigal" has been lost to some extent.
Prodigal means wastefully extravagant, lavish, luxuriant.
When you think how the father displays his love for his son in this story, the father is
also the prodigal.
God, our Father, is the preeminent Prodigal.
He is lavish with His grace.
He is extravagant with His love.
Being poured out in blood and water from the wounded side of Christ on the cross for
us.
His love that forgives and welcomes home with stretched arms.
By running to meet us and showering us with His outrageous grace and mercy.
A grace and a love that is more expansive and extensive than we could ever hope for
or ask for.
And we now gladly honor this love and follow our Heavenly Father because He first
loves us.
We praise our Heavenly Father!
We thank our Heavenly Father for His abundant love and mercy that make us His
beloved children of whom He is well-pleased.

Amen!