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Luke 15:1-3, 11-24  
SEE THE FATHER'S LAVISH LOVE (PART I)

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There are certain texts that a pastor really gets excited to preach on. This morning's text is one of my favorites and I would imagine most pastors feel the same way. It is a story of love, lavish love that we would not expect. Only St. Luke tells us this story. Luke's Gospel especially emphasizes the "lostness" of the lost. St. Luke repeatedly drives home the point that Jesus is the Savior of all. If you are descended from Adam (and all of us are), then Jesus died for you.

Jesus tells this beautiful story to a double audience. We have to keep that in mind. The first group was made up of tax collectors and "sinners." Tax collectors were Jewish people who worked for the Roman government collecting taxes. They were not known for their honesty. They were viewed as traitors and thieves, charging the people whatever they could get away with. The "sinners" were people who had messed up their lives in all kinds of different ways. Everyone could see that. They would go out and get hammered on Friday night doing stupid things, waking up with a hangover on Saturday and vowing they would never drink again. At six o'clock that evening they went out drinking again. These people had problems with all kinds of things. They knew they had problems. They had heard that Jesus was different. Jesus was not there to condemn them for their mistakes, but he offered them hope and acceptance instead of the rejection and scorn that others were happy to share.

On the other hand, you had the Pharisees and teachers of the law. These were people who outwardly observed the Law of Moses and went beyond it, way beyond it! They didn't feel that the Law and punishment for lawbreakers was harsh enough. They kept adding new laws for themselves to keep and for others to break. They didn't have a whole lot of respect for Jesus who would not only speak to these sinners. He would eat with them, showing them far more respect than they deserved.

This story is known by a number of names. The most familiar calls it the Parable of the Prodigal (or wasteful) Son. Sometimes it is called the Parable of the Two Lost Sons. There are three central characters in this story. I think we have all seen people who behave like each of the two sons. And we had better see ourselves in the mirror there. But the father is unique, unlike any other father. I want you to focus our attention on him this morning. SEE THE FATHER'S LAVISH LOVE (PART I)!

You could say that they had a good life. Some might describe it as boring. The younger son certainly would. But they lacked for nothing. There was always food on the table, clothing to wear, and a roof over their heads. There were probably more than a few other comforts that they enjoyed as well. But the younger son wasn't happy. In fact, he was miserable. He wanted out and he wanted out now. He asked his father for his share of the inheritance.

Since the father was still around, the son was basically saying, "Dad, I really wish you were dead, so that I could live my life the way I want to live without you around." I'm sure that made the father feel very good. Nevertheless, we see that the father did grant his son's request. He would have to put up at least part of his estate for sale. He sold it and gave the proceeds to his younger son. The older son would receive a double portion of the estate.

As soon as he got his hands on the money, the younger son blew town. He was going to get as far away from his father as possible. He needed liquid assets that he could turn into pleasure. He went to a distant country. One

imagines that he had a considerable wad of cash as he began his journey. One can also imagine that he picked up a few new friends along the way to help him spend that cash. Like many athletes and entertainers, he might have a posse who followed him around, leeching whatever they could get. The ladies probably followed him as well, sighing over that beautiful necklace they wished that they could have if only some good-looking guy would buy it for them.

And then it was gone, all of it! He squandered his wealth in wild living. He lived like there was no tomorrow. He blew every dollar he had, one dollar at a time. And when the money was gone, so were his so-called friends and his girlfriends. They wanted nothing to do with this loser who had nothing left to give them for their friendship. They would move on to other greener pastures.

Oh, there was another problem. There was a famine in the land. Food was not plentiful, and neither were jobs. Now he had previously done chores for his father, but he was a son. He didn't have to do the worst jobs. Servants did those. But now it was different. He finally found a job with one of the citizens of that country, but it wasn't a dream job. He had a job feeding pigs. Have you ever driven by a pig farm? There's no mistake with that smell. And feeding pigs was the ultimate indignity to a Jew. Not only was the work distasteful, but the pigs were unclean animals. One could only imagine the look on the faces of the Pharisees as Jesus told this story!

And the saddest thing? The pigs were eating better than this young man. He wished that he could eat the pig food. Nobody cared enough to give him anything to eat. Nobody cared about him at all. If he died tomorrow, nobody would grieve or mourn. In that country he was the ultimate loser.

He finally comes to his senses. He realizes that he has hit rock bottom. How could he possibly sink any lower than he has? He starts thinking about a lot of things. He starts thinking about his former home and his father. The old man really wasn't that bad. In fact, his father was far nicer than anyone in this crazy country. Maybe he really could go home again.

So, he starts to formulate a plan. He will debate each point for hours as he begins his trek back to his homeland. He is going to confess his sin to his father. That is a good thing! There was no excuse for the way that he had behaved. Secondly, he would also confess his unworthiness of being a son. He did not deserve to be treated as a son, but maybe his father would hire him on as a servant. He could still live at home and enjoy some of the comforts that he had previously enjoyed but really didn't realize it. But his repentance would be on his own terms. He would begin to pay off his debt. He would earn his way back into his father's good graces. He hoped that the father would accept his offer of honest work and let him come home again.

Now the father had a number of options. As Jesus told the story, remember the fact that he was telling it to two different audiences. Think about how they would have responded and how the other group would have felt about that plan of action.

The first reaction would be to deal with his son in justice. The father could have told this stinky, smelly bum to just keep on walking. He didn't know when he had a good thing. He got all his inheritance, and he spent every last dime of it. Should the father spend any more of his money and possessions on this former son? Why should he? This son wanted him dead. The father went far beyond what any other father would have done already. Let the prodigal find some other job and home. He got what he deserved by his actions. He brought it all on himself. That would be justice. We can certainly see the Pharisees and teachers of the Law nodding their heads in agreement with that option.

The second option would be that the father deal with his son in mercy. Yes, this son really had screwed up. He made some mistakes, and they were big ones. But this young man was still his own flesh and blood. Biologically they were still family and that still meant something. But this young man would have to learn his lesson. He would come back but he would be put on double secret probation. He would have to earn his way back. He could sleep out in the barn

with the other hired hands. If he behaved himself, he might be able to attend some family functions. After a few years, well, then things might change, but until then, he would have to prove himself. Once again, we can see most of the sinners nodding in agreement and maybe even a few of the Pharisees who were tenderhearted.

But there was one more option, an option that sounds unbelievable. The father would not deal with his prodigal son in justice or in mercy. He would deal with him in grace. Grace is not merely undeserved love. It is the very opposite of what we deserve. We all know what this good for nothing man deserved, don't we?

What did the father do? The father is there waiting for him. The father never gave up hope. When he sees his son approaching, the father is filled with compassion for him. His love takes the initiative. He can't wait to see his son again. The father begins to run to see his son and to hug him. He runs as fast as he can. The son has practiced his speech for weeks but does not get a single word out. The father won't let him. He doesn't scold or punish his son. There is something more important to do. He is going to restore his son to his position in the family.

It didn't matter if his son still smelled like pigs, or he was ragged and dirty. What mattered is that his son was home. He was lost and now is found. He was dead and now is alive. He is given the best robe, the ring and sandals of sonship and there will be a feast of celebration. This is not something that is private. This is public. The father wants the entire community to know that his son has returned and that this man is his son in every way.

The prodigal never got a chance to finish his speech and the reason that he could not finish it was that he was overwhelmed by his father's grace. The problem is not the lost money that he had squandered. The problem was the broken relationship that he could not heal. He now understands that any new relationship must be a pure gift from his father. To think that he can somehow compensate his father with his labor is an insult.

The father is indeed the wild card in this whole story. His actions were shocking to everyone and especially the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. The father expressed his complete reconciliation and acceptance of his son publicly – and he does this before the prodigal has uttered a word of confession!

This is a beautiful story, but it is more than a story. It is truth. Did you see yourself as the prodigal son? Did you see how you have wanted to get away from God and at times of your life have done exactly that? Did you see how you wanted God to accept you on your terms? God does not deal with us in justice or mercy either. He deals with us in grace. He gives us the opposite of what we deserve. Thousands of years before we were ever born, he formulated a plan to restore us to full sonship. He would send his Son into the world to take our place, to pay for our sins of discontent, of riotous living, of squandering our inheritance, of living in filth and of thinking that we could solve the problem ourselves. Yes, that loving father in the parable is our father and he has restored us to sonship. No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, this father's love is yours and forever. Rejoice! AMEN.