

Sermon 3-31-19  
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Based on the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Luke 15:1-3,11-32

### **Give Hope a Chance**

Lent is a solemn season of repentance. Its purpose is twofold. First, and primary, we reflect upon all Jesus the Messiah did to deliver humanity from our wicked rebellion against our Creator. Second we identify and repent of our own personal rebellion in order to be reconciled with Our Father in heaven.

Now, in the midst of Lenten solemnity, the ancient church appointed the fourth Sunday of Lent to be a Sunday of joy. The reason is simple. Real repentance and absolution brings joy. Therefore, in our lessons today, we celebrate the joy that comes from being reconciled with Our Father in heaven.

As we see from today's lessons, the joy goes in both directions. First, and foremost, Yahweh becomes joyous over the recovery of His lost children from sin, death and the power of the devil. But there is also joy for we rebels who return home to find Yahweh's unexpected welcome.

Just last week, we spoke about Yahweh being the one and only source of love, righteousness, justice and goodness in the entire universe. He's it. There is no other because He is all love, righteousness, justice and goodness.

This week, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we get an earthly picture of what happens when, in our rebellion, we define love, righteousness, justice and goodness for ourselves. We see what happens when we want to run as far as possible from Our Father and His love, righteousness, justice and goodness.

The parable's picture is that of a young man from a wealthy family who chooses to leave home in order to live a life unbounded by his father's definition of righteousness. With a load of money from his inheritance, he sets off. He finds a place to his liking where he can spend all day, every day, indulging in the finest depravity money can buy – the best liquor, the best prostitutes, the finest schemes to do raunchy, rebellious stuff.

But because there's no financial income in this young man's life, there comes a day when the wealth is used up. It's on that day that the reality of need begins to settle in. And need is an overpowering reality for those who have no resources. Need eventually drives the young man to one of the most repugnant jobs for a Jewish man – taking care of pigs. This is a job for gentile boys, not a good Jewish boy.

And the employer of this young man is a devil who does not pay him a living wage. Therefore, the young man is homeless, hungry and filthy. This is an earthly picture of spiritual realities beyond this life. The pigpen is a preview of hell. Hell is the place where we can finally and completely have our own way without Yahweh, just like this young man had his own way. But hell is also a place of crushing need for there is no love, righteousness, justice and goodness there. There is only evil and the devil

But fortunately, the pigpen of this parable is not exactly hell. For in hell, the occupants become evil without their Creator and His blessed attributes. There is no hope for them. This does not happen to the young man.

Rather, it's clear that the parable describes a situation on earth where homelessness, hunger, filth and a terrible lack of resources drives an important message home into the young man's heart: I have sinned.

And though the realization of his sin probably drove the young man to despair for a while, nevertheless, this is earth. Yahweh has not abandoned any on earth like He abandons those sentenced to the Lake of Fire. Therefore, one day a glimmer of hope entered his life in the form of a thought. What if I return to my Father? What if I return to the one who is all love, righteousness, justice and goodness?

As he thinks about it, he realizes that he has no right to return as a son. He blew his family standing big time. He would bring nothing back to his father but shame. However, hope is still there because the young man knows his father is a just employer. Unlike the devil he's working for, the young man's father pays his workers a living wage. It's in this hope that the young man finally leaves the pigpen and heads home.

Now, it occurs to me that this parable is more than just a story. It is truth. For, the parable explains why the number of chronic homeless and wasted people in this country just keeps on growing. Running as far away from God as you possibly can to do your own thing eventually results in chronic homelessness and squalor. Literally. And this is nothing new. It always has. What is new is the number of people running from God. Also new, is the number who just abandon hope because they don't believe there's a God to hope in.

It's not as if there are no Christian organizations whose ministry is aimed specifically at the chronically homeless. There are also plenty of government programs to help them. But, they will endure anything – even living without hope – simply to be their own gods and their own masters, in order to live as debauched as they desire.

But, just like in the parable, the way out is hope. Those who seek God's hope will find it. And when God's hope comes to them, they can be rescued if they will simply give hope a chance. Indeed, the lead article of the most recent newsletter from the Hoving Home in Garrison, New York is the testimony of a woman who had endured years of addiction, prostitution, incarceration and homelessness. She was sleeping in a shed when the people who brought her hope found her. She didn't think much of their Jesus offer, but decided that anything was better than what she had. That little seed of hope got her to the Hoving Home. And life in the Hoving Home brought her the joy of reconciliation with her Father in heaven and a great new lease on life.

That's the thing about life on God's little green earth. No matter how bad it gets, it's never hopeless. For Yahweh has not abandoned us. He is in this world, even though He's hidden. His love, righteousness, justice and goodness have a definite effect here. Indeed, the reason atheists, communists and all kinds of rebels grind their teeth and rail continuously against God is because He does have an effect here, and always has. Folks like the women recovering in the Hoving Home testify to the presence and power of Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit.

Now, the father of the prodigal son has another son. He's the father of two sons, and this parable should really be called the Parable of the Two Sons. The other son is the older of the two boys. He's the good son, the one who ostensibly lives by his Father's rules.

But, when the younger son returns home from the pigpen, we discover that the older son is also a rebel against his Father. For the life of him, he cannot share in the joy of his Father concerning his younger brother's return home alive.

More than that, he accuses his Father of unrighteousness. How can you let this rebel scum back into our home? How can you bestow on him the same standing I have had with you – I who have stood by you through everything and have not wasted what you gave me nor brought shame on the family? In the older son's words we hear no joy, only bitter complaining against the Father.

Now, if we were to turn this whole parable into a play, there would be numerous key emotional points to the drama. First, how would the audience feel about the young man going off on his own to live life to the fullest by leaving behind the prudish values of his family? As Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we might find many in the audience applauding that. And that says something. And how would we feel about witnessing his rock-star debauchery? Would any feel shame because of it? Or would we eagerly expect more, like watching a soap opera? Then, what about the young man's sobering comeuppance? Would we say that he got what he deserved, or would we be disappointed by the result of his raunchy living?

And then watching the young man debate with himself in the pigpen, what would we think? Would we feel his deep shame? Would we even think he needs to be ashamed? Would we struggle with him as he weighs his pressing physical needs against the great shame that keeps him from going home? What would we think of the speech he finally perfects to speak to his father – a speech of guilt, repentance, but also a speech of hope? Would we cheer him as he heads home? Or would we be feeling a deep burden of fear, anxiety and uncertainty?

What about the father? Do we agree with his reception of his son? Do we agree with the father that the son's life is worth more than the deep shame he has brought upon the family? Should he welcome the son or turn him away? Then, there's the matter of the son's judgment upon himself. Should the father have received him back as a worker or slave instead of reinstating his status as son and heir?

And finally we get to the older brother. I suspect that if there's a character in this drama that contemporary Americans would boo, it would be the older brother. What a killjoy! Filled with self-pity, believing you're some kind of victim, which you're not! That says something. But, if we stop to think perhaps we won't boo. We believe in the principal that doing the right thing should produce a benefit far above doing the wrong thing. And that's what this older brother believes. He's wondering where that principal has gotten to in this whole affair. And that's why he's accusing his father of unrighteousness.

Now, if we were to turn this parable into a TV series, the speculation would begin after episode one of how these people are going to live with each other. Will the older brother be doing everything possible to undermine his younger brother? How will the father present the younger son to the community? Will the younger kid

get into trouble again now that he's well fed? Most importantly, will the older brother ever accept the father's decision? Ah the list of episodes could go on and on.

But the parable ends where it does for a reason. Parables are stories of this age used to describe the age to come. They're also earthly stories used to describe events that will bring the present age to an end. They're also earthly stories used to describe God Himself.

This parable describes God and His righteousness and justice. Remember. When everything is said and done, our definitions of righteousness and justice will perish. Only God's will remain. Therefore, Jesus is telling this parable so we'll all get used to our Creator's righteousness and justice as He redeems us his rebellious children.

Do you remember from last week that there was a rather convoluted passage from Ezekiel 33:7-20. In it God complained that Israel was calling Him unjust for doing the very same thing that the father does in the parable of the prodigal son. Therefore, God set Israel straight. He told them in Ezekiel 33:18-19, "18 If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, he will die for it. 19 And if a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he will live by doing so." Jesus amplified this passage in His Prodigal Son parable and in similar parables.

In that passage we also heard Yahweh say in Ezekiel 33:11, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." Jesus amplified this in Luke 15:7, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

This is the great hope that exists with God. What kind of sinners is He speaking of? Does this include all acts of the sinful nature as in the list Paul presents in Galatians 5:19-21, "19 ... sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like." Does it include thieves? Does it include slanderers? Does it include the violent? How about child abusers and mass-murderers? Yes. Yes. And Yes. The reason is that the suffering of the Son of God Himself has been sufficient to pay for the most heinous of sins, including the heinous sin of crucifying the Son of God.

And now here's an even more important question. Is this hope extended even to those who have hated God and violently opposed Him? Yes. Yes. And Yes. Those who come home in repentant shame, and yet in hope, will find that with their Father in heaven their hope has not been in vain. This is why the church extends ministry to the impenitent. We just never know when someone in a pigpen will begin to think differently and begin to hope.

There's one more thing about this parable. God is the Father. The elder son is the religious, observant Jew. The prodigal son represents the tax collectors and other sinners who Jesus said were coming into the Kingdom of God ahead of the observant ones. But the prodigal son can also represent all the gentiles. Remember. In the time of Jesus the whole world except for the Jews had turned away from Yahweh their Creator. They had sunk into the pagan pigpen of false religion, despair and debauchery. Therefore, has Yahweh rejoiced throughout the centuries as gentile

culture after culture has turned to Him? Is He still rejoicing? Will He rejoice when we begin to turn away from our neo-paganism? Most assuredly, says Jesus.

It is Yahweh's great desire that none shall perish. This is the great hope of all who come to Him in repentance of their rebellion and sin. All who come to Yahweh seeking the righteousness of His Christ shall find it. For as Saint Paul declared in 2 Corinthians 5:20-21, "20... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The joy of our Creator will be complete when He has gathered all who will come to Him into His righteousness forever. Isaiah 55:6-7, "6 Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." In Christ alone He will freely pardon. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.