

**Augusta First Baptist Church**  
**Luke 15:11-1-32**  
***Learning to Forgive: The Loving Father***  
**June 18, 2006**

NRS Luke 15:11 *Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.*

*13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.*

*17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' 20 So he set off and went to his father.*

*But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one-- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.*

*25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.*

*29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'*

*31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"*

This is the final message of our trilogy based on Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. We have viewed the face of the prodigal son and the face of the elder brother. Today on Father's Day we conclude with the face of the father himself.

We know this story well, perhaps too well. Most of us spend our attention on the wayward son who lived foolishly and wastefully and regrettably. But the story is not about this reckless son, even though that is where we place most of our attention. We have even named this story after the son. Yet Jesus begins the story by saying in verse 11: *There once was a man who had two sons.* From the very beginning, Jesus, the storyteller wants us to know that the father is the main character. What the father does and how he reacts **is** the point of the story.

In verse 12 the tension is set. The son asks for his share of the inheritance. The request was both disrespectful and insulting. In essence his father would now be dead to him. In the Greek it literally reads that the father "divided his *life* between them."

For families where division has defined you, can you not empathize with this story's thickening plot where relationships are deadened and the patriarch divides his life over the children? Indeed, this is a story for any strained or fractured relationship – a friend, a colleague, or a church member. This is also a story for all of us, who in one way or another, have found ourselves homeless from God. It is like the college student who leaves home and chooses to leave behind his faith; it happens every fall of the school year. It is the executive who has climbed the corporate ladder of success and somewhere along the line God got left behind. It is the hurting adult child who has stood by the bedside of her suffering parent and feels alone and cut off. It is not hard to be a prodigal. Prodigals even go to church, serve on committees and are highly respected leaders.

But, like I said – the focus is not on our waywardness but on the father's giving love.

There are three things I want us to see about the father's forgiveness:

*The father's forgiveness focused on...*

...**Seeking, Not Losing.**

At the outset this may seem rather straightforward, but I am not so sure we get this. This entire story is part of a larger collection of lost and found in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter. Chapter 15 begins with the criticisms of the religious community – the scribes and Pharisees. They were grumbling against Jesus because he drew the wrong kind of crowd: tax collectors and sinners. Jesus always seemed to be in the middle of misfits, miscreants and marginalized. We do not often hear of him dwelling between the shakers and movers of the community, who serve on the Chamber of Commerce, join the Rotary and host the galas. Jesus responds to their criticism by telling them stories of what it means to be lost and then found, like the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son.

It is a lost and found kind of tale. As a church we have a place for the lost and found. In fact it is a box. It is just a collection of items people have lost and evidently never missed. Most of this stuff – reading glasses, costume jewelry, pens, and keys - has been here for a long time. It is unclaimed because nobody has looked for these items. Evidently they are not precious enough. Often enough when you lose a small item like this stuff it is enough to just shrug your shoulders and give it up for lost.

Blessed is the life when the focus is not on losing but finding. Last year I read the novel *Gilead*. In it one of the characters came back from fighting in the Civil War wounded and blinded in one eye. The locals would comment to him about how tragic it was to lose his right eye. His reply was simple: "I would like to think that I have returned with one good eye."

Here I am not suggesting something pithy, like keep on the sunny side. But if forgiveness focuses on calculating what things are lost – lost love, lost opportunity, lost reputation, and so on – we will become bitter. I did not say we are in danger of becoming bitter; we might be bitter or some will be bitter. When we focus on what we lost we become bitter and resentful.

The Pharisees really did not care about the found. It was far more convenient to criticize the wayward and lost. But the father focused not on what was lost – lost wealth, lost opportunities, lost reputation - because this son of his, as is recorded in verse 32, was found.

First Baptist is in the search and rescue business. We are the finding church.

*The father's forgiveness demonstrated...*

...**Prodigal love**

A couple of weeks ago I shared with you the definition of "prodigal." It means to be *recklessly extravagant*. Whenever we speak of the son who took half his father's inheritance and squandered it on

dissolute living we call him the “Prodigal.” But the father is a prodigal too. He is recklessly extravagant with his love. It is foolish... [20] *But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him...22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-- the best one-- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.'* The “loving father” certainly earns his title of “loving.” In effect he has lost both his sons. He lost his younger son to recklessness and carelessness. But you know he lost his older son too. He lost him to angry self-righteousness.

The father loves them and forgives them. He does so not according to what they deserve or what they have earned. In fact, there is no repentance in this story. What I mean by that is his youngest son, although penitent, is not given the chance. His father cuts him off in mid-sentence and declares a party for this one who was lost and now is found, this one who was dead and now lives. He loves both of his sons – the prodigal and the sullen one - because of who *he* is, not because of who *they* are.

Most of us remember the name Timothy McVeigh. He was the one guilty of the horrific bombing of the Federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995. His act of violence took the lives of 168 persons – including 19 children – and McVeigh caustically described the dead as “collateral damage.” Timothy McVeigh also had a father. His father pleaded that the life of his son would be spared not because he excused Timothy McVeigh but because he was his father; he loved him. This is what dad’s do.

Now let’s bring this all home for a moment. Some of you here are experiencing the very real pain of living in a divided family. You have lost something precious to you. Now is the time to be found. Now is the time to practice prodigal love: a love that is given not because it is asked for or deserved; a love that is not measured or conditional. Prodigal love is foolish and extravagant. Critics might describe it as wasteful. But that is the kind of love Jesus was describing in his story. In fact it is the kind of love that God gives today.

Without forgiveness we are like the boy in the pigpen or the brother standing out in the yard while the rest of the family celebrates. We are outside looking in. Can’t you just see the father welcoming us home again, inviting us to come inside?

*Finally, the father’s forgiveness was willing...*

**...to go the distance...**

A church member wrote me the following question: I have always wondered, especially as a parent, how the father continued to treat the prodigal son once he returned home. What if that next Friday the son asked for \$20, would the father say, “Sorry son, you already received your share of the inheritance.”

Now let me say from the outset: this is not a manual on proper parenting. It is a story about the lost and found and it gives us a big window to forgiveness and grace. Now back to the question, at first I thought the church member was just toying with me a bit, but after thinking it through, it really is a great question. Here is my answer to the question of would this father continue to give to this son who has demonstrated wastefulness and used up all his inheritance: Yes. This is a story among the other stories that is not concerned with the negatives – the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son. This is a story about redemption in being found.

Yes, the more I think about it the more I am convinced that if the son were to come back and say to his dad he would like to borrow the camel for the evening and head out to Jerusalem to hang out with a few friends and could he borrow 20 shekels for the night, the father would have reciprocated. Chances are you and I would like the father, remind his son how he already received his inheritance and *squandered* every penny! But grace is, after all, quite offensive. That is what upset the religious leaders.

Some of us may want to say, “But isn’t this condoning the sinner, condoning wastefulness?” No. In fact this story has nothing to do with consequences and retributive justice. It is simply our picture of God – the

giving and grace-full father who loves, and welcomes and receives time and again. God is the one who celebrates when the dead are alive again and the lost are found.

In this story the father is willing to go the distance. I read a story from *Sports Illustrated* about Dick Hoyt who is 65 and has run 85 marathons. Get this – every marathon Dick has run he has pushed his son who is in a wheelchair. Eight times he's not only pushed him 26.2 miles in a wheelchair but also towed him 2.4 miles in a dinghy while swimming and pedaled him 112 miles in a seat on the handlebars - all in the same day. It makes our complaints about taking our children to Chucky Cheese kind of lame, don't you think? It all started when his son, who was brain-damaged and wheelchair bound since birth, was 11. A charity run was organized and his son wanted his dad to push him the five miles. Dick was described as a "porker" who never ran more than a mile. After this first run his son told him "when we were running, it felt like I wasn't disabled any more!"

The article goes on to say "And that sentence changed Dick's life. He became obsessed with giving Rick that feeling as often as he could." "Now they've done 212 Triathlons, including four grueling 15-hour Iron Men in Hawaii. It must be a buzz kill to be a 25-year-old stud getting passed by an old guy towing a grown man in a dinghy, don't you think?" "No question about it," Rick types. "My dad is the Father of the Century." And Dick got something else out of all this too. Two years ago he had a mild heart attack during a race. Doctors found that one of his arteries was 95% clogged. "If you hadn't been in such great shape," one doctor told him, "you probably would've died 15 years ago." So, in a way, Dick and Rick saved each other's life. "The thing I'd most like," Rick types, "is for my dad to sit in the chair and I push him once." (By Rick Reilly, *Sports Illustrated*.) Jesus paints the picture of the father looking, searching, waiting...waiting...waiting. That is God's love for you and me. God waits while we work through our low self-esteem, while we seethe with resentment, while we begrudge a neighbor. God waits with a love that will go the distance we have set between ourselves and others.

Yes, there are many faces to forgiveness. Like the prodigal, we bear the image of one who has lived foolishly and thoughtlessly. Like the elder brother, we bear the image of the one who cannot let go of the bitterness and disappointment and cannot for the life of him imagine living reconciled when the hurt runs deep. But the face we dare not miss in this story is the face of the father, the one who looks and waits and loves.

Most of you may not know but I have only seen my mother once since I was 14 years old – and that was about nine years ago. I saw her only briefly; we met, embraced and that was pretty much it. Amy said she looked a lot like me. A few months ago I was reading the story of a pilot named Ron who spoke of meeting his father for the first time. Ron's parents divorced when he was a baby. All he knew about his father was that he came from Kansas City and that, in his mother's opinion, was "not a nice person."

One day Ron's flight assignment was switched and he had a lengthy layover in Kansas City. He said curiosity got the better of him and he picked up the phone book, looked up his father's name and after four or five awkward attempts decided to call his dad. Sure enough, the man's name in the phone book was his father. They agreed to meet the next morning over coffee.

Ron would wear his pilot's uniform and his father was to wear a blue sports shirt so that they could recognize each other. But those precautions were not necessary for the minute Ron's father walked into the lobby, he recognized him. He said it was like looking in a mirror.

The thirty-minute cup of coffee wound up lasting all day and it turned out that Ron's father was an amateur pilot whose occupation was photography. Ron was an amateur photographer and a professional pilot.

"We had so much in common," Ron said, "*that it was like finding a piece of myself.*"

He ended his story by saying, "I wonder if meeting God will be like that?"