

“Overcoming Limits”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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II Corinthians 5:16-21; Lue 15:1-3, 11b-32

Everything on earth has limits. Flowers bloom but eventually fade. The greatest athlete can run only so fast or jump so high or so long before they tear muscle and break bone. We can survive for several days without water or sleep, and even longer without food, but even under the best circumstances, the longest recorded human life lasted just a shade over 120 years, unless you take the genealogies of Genesis literally, in which case the prize goes to Methuselah, who made it 969 years. [Genesis 5:27] But even the verse that celebrates his long life concludes, “and he died.”

By and large, such limits don’t trouble us too much. Few of us miss a meal, unless we’re fasting, or a night’s sleep. Potable water is readily available. We might be reluctant to die, but then again, as the famous song by Queen asked, “Who wants to live forever?”

As we age, our limitations become more acute, and after a while, a person of faith makes peace with God and prepares to die. We may try to stretch the boundaries a little through medical technology or our own disciplined efforts, but deep down mature people accept our limits as part of the created order, a facet of who we are. So our physical limitations, though frustrating, don’t really bother us too much, certainly not as much as some other limitations.

There are other limits that irritate us to no end. Perhaps we chafe at rigid rules imposed by family or society. Maybe we struggle against a glass ceiling in our career, or fume at our consistent inability to meet our often unreasonable goals. Limits come in all kinds of shapes and sizes and flavors, many of them tight and uncomfortable.

We want to break out, to escape, so we take action, often of the self-destructive variety. We do drugs – legal and otherwise. We resort to retail therapy, or binge-watching Netflix. We shut down emotionally and hide from people. We indulge in ignorance and arrogance, shutting our eyes to reality and pretending that we have no limits. It's been happening for eons, since biblical times and before, and today we hear a cardinal example from the Gospel of Luke.

We know the story as The Parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son, eager to break free from the responsibilities of farm and family, ready to see and conquer the world, as young men are wont to do, went to his father wanting to cash in his inheritance a little early. The message is clear. "Dad, I've been waiting for you to pop off for some time now, and my patience is wearing a bit then. So if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I'd like my share of the estate in advance." Nothing could be harsher for a father to hear, and yet strangely, the father didn't admonish his son or dispute his claim, but did as his younger son asked.

A few days later, with a purse bursting with coins and big dreams of glory, the young man set out and travelled to a distant country called, in Hebrew, Las Vegas, where he partied all his money away. When there was nothing left, he started working for a local farmer in an area suffering from famine. Evidently, he didn't earn enough money to keep himself fed, because the young man seriously considered eating slop with the hogs. If that's not hitting rock bottom, I don't know what is. Having escaped one set of limits, the young man discovered an entirely new set, much worse than what he was under before, and eventually he figured out that he'd be better off going home, hoping that his father would hire him.

Returning home, with a well-rehearsed speech, the young man received a most astonishing welcome. His father ran out to the road to greet him. In that culture, and in many still today, men do not run, except in battle. It's considered undignified for a man to run, but run

the father did with tears brimming up in his eyes, voice trembling as he shouted to servants: “Brings rings and robes. Start a fire for the feast. He’s alive. He’s alive!” So the servants dropped what they’re doing and scurried around, quickly pulling together a fabulous feast, and everything’s great until the older son comes in from the field.

All this time, while little brother’s been out dirty dancing and doing Jell-O shots, big brother has been toiling in the fields, picking up the slack and helping dad deal with the grief of a lost son and the financial strain caused by the lost assets said son took with him. It had been a long slog with no end in sight. Big brother may have even lost hope for his dreams, of ever making it big and having a little fun of his own along the way.

Sunburned and soaked with sweat, big brother trudged home weary. All he wanted was a bath and a bed, but as he approached the house, the faint sound of music and the scent of roasting meat greeted him. At first, he may have felt concerned. “We can’t afford this. What is dad doing?” But then, deep down inside, a spark of hope might have ignited. “Maybe it’s for me. Maybe, just this once, I get a special treat for having worked so hard.”

But a servant set him straight. “Your brother’s back. This is for him. Your dad is the happiest we’ve seen him in years. Go on in and try the veal. It’s excellent.” Big brother reached his limit and went ballistic with his father. “I can’t take it anymore. This is ridiculous. It’s unjust what you’re doing.” And the father responded, “Yes, you’re right. It’s unjust.” The big brother demanded to know, “Is there no limit to how much you love him?” “No, son, no limits at all.” I’ve always wondered if the older son stayed, or went away? The story doesn’t say. It just stops right there in a tense, suspenseful moment between father and son, with the party revving up in the background.

Each son met limits in their lives, and each wanted to overcome those limits. Fortunately, they were children of a father who surprisingly had none – no limits whatsoever. Oh, he had to work within the created order, toil in the soil for his bread, tend his herds just like everyone else, but when it came to what mattered most – no limits, just love.

We always call that story The Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it's really about the father more than anyone else. The sons are just stock characters. The elder is a good guy who feels wronged. The younger is a typical wastrel who did wrong. Both succumb to their limits. The elder can't understand his father and can't forgive his brother. The younger can't stand staying at home yet lacks the discipline to make it alone. But the father, now that's the odd one. No matter what his sons do, he loves them both without limit, and he tries to help them overcome their limitations.

Of course, the whole story is a metaphor. The father is God, and the sons represent us. Some, like the younger son, feel too tightly bound by their covenant with God, so they stray as far as humanly possible, doing everything within their power to rebel in the search for freedom, but in the end finding only despair. The younger son can't stand the thought of working on the farm under authority. The idea of worship and study and service is utterly repellent to him. Get me away from all of this boring drudgery, and let the good times roll.

Others, like the elder son, feel resentment because God spends so much time and energy trying to bring back the strays and welcoming the ones who make it home. But the elder son needs attention, too, and sometimes asks, "Why have I been forgotten? Am I being taken for granted? Where's the recognition, the appreciation, for all the hard work?"

Strange how both sons, how both groups of people, different in so many ways, actually have the same limits: limits to their patience, limits to their self-restraint; limits to their feelings

of personal security and self-worth. Each suffers from resentment and envy, and each needs the father's help to overcome their limitations.

The life of faith is about overcoming limitations. We die, yet we shall live. We heal, even though the disease may never be cured. We hurt and are hurt, but we forgive and receive forgiveness. We suffer differences that threaten to divide us, yet remain united. We spread light into the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

That grace of overcoming is amazing, so amazing that when it happens to us, like the younger brother, we can hardly believe it. And when it happens to others, we can hardly believe it, like the older brother, because we are both at the same time: older brother and younger, two sides of the same sinful soul. And where we find resolution for this spiritual dissonance is through unity with God, who makes us a new creation.

Paul put it well, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors of Christ, since God is making his appeal through us." [II Corinthians 5:17-20]

And the appeal we make on God's behalf is this. Children who wander aimlessly are always welcome home. Children who stay at home are equally adored. There isn't anything fair about it. There's just love, and in that love there are no limits that cannot be overcome. Amen.